JULIE BLACKMON

THE EVERYDAY FANTASTIC

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART,
DARTMOUTH

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Julie Blackmon: The Everyday Fantastic features work from this major American photographer's most recent, ongoing series, *Homegrown*—a title both fitting and revealing. Blackmon was raised in Springfield, Missouri, and has decided to remain there and make her hometown the setting for her images. Rather than searching the globe, she carefully choreographs the local scenes that become her photographs, essentially creating a fertile space for her subject matter to grow in her own neighborhood.

Blackmon explores Middle America with a poetic combination of wonder and worry as she delves into the perpetual mysteries of daily life in a familiar place. Her subjects exist somewhat outside of time—or, at least, they are not obviously or specifically of today. Rather, her "sets" abound with objects of pre-internet play—evoking a childhood closer to that of the artist than that of her young actors. The children in her narratives get bored, pretend, stage performances, and generally rely on imagination to fill their days. Ultimately, the characters in her work mirror in their play the very practice adopted so successfully by the artist. Her richly detailed photographs depend on meticulous staging, serendipity, and the imagination of her viewers.

In this series, her third, Blackmon evokes a domestic world gone just slightly awry. There is nothing disastrous in her mise-en-scènes—yet. There are living rooms inhabited only by children caught up in dramas of their own invention; there are backyard barbeques, poolside moments, and garage sales. None of this is ordinarily the stuff of suspense, but in each one of her images, Blackmon suggests potential intrigues percolating just below the level of the obvious. The artist's brilliance lies in allowing viewers the sense that they make their own discoveries. Blackmon's actors appear to be unaware of the dramas in which they participate.

Many of her images present a twist on one of Alfred Hitchcock's most famous narrative devices: the ticking bomb. In an oft-quoted passage, the French filmmaker François Truffaut asked Hitchcock for his "definition of the difference between 'suspense' and 'surprise.'" Hitchcock expounded:

> We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, "Boom!" There is an explosion. The public is *surprised*, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene of no special consequence. Now, let us take a *suspense* situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public *knows* it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the décor. In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb beneath you and it's about to explode!"
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> In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of *surprise* at the moment of the explosion. In the second we

have provided them with fifteen minutes of *suspense*. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed.[1]

Blackmon creates tension in her scenes in a similar manner. In *Loading Zone* from 2008, for example, she generates insecurity in an otherwise innocuous situation. Her viewer can clearly see three children playing on or near a street. That street has a double yellow line, which signals that passing cars are likely travelling fairly fast. The children are caught up in their own worlds, paying attention neither to each other nor to their surroundings. All the while the only visible, potentially responsible adult is head-deep in a car trunk, oblivious to the potential danger. True to Hitchcock, nobody in the scene appears to worry about the children's welfare, and only the viewer can see the threat.

Blackmon knows her art history as well. In interviews, she has shared her love, in particular, of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painter Jan Steen. His work often shows a domestic world out of control. Blackmon's avowed inspiration by Steen embroils her practice in a long-standing dilemma in the study of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting: where is the balance between reality and symbolism? On the one side we have scholars defending these Dutch paintings as elaborate descriptions of Netherlandish life in the seventeenth century. Svetlana Alpers published *The Art of Describing* as a rebuke to what she felt was an overreliance on interpreting these paintings as inventories of symbols—on metaphoric readings of the paintings.[2]

Clearly, before a writer begins to read symbols into any work of art, they must ascertain the appropriateness of such interpretations. This is the only way to avoid ascribing meaning where none was intended. Steen undeniably

packed his paintings with details, but do they double as specific references to proverbs steeped in morality? Interpreting the objects in his paintings as symbols can be tricky. When is a slipper just a slipper? This is an important distinction for Blackmon's work as well. Her images are replete with discordant individual motifs. By the very fact of their inclusion in the scene, Blackmon triggers suspicion that these details may evoke more than they describe.

There is an approach to the study of Dutch art that potentially sheds light on how best to sift through the layers of suggestions and references in Blackmon's photographs. It is embodied most clearly in the scholarship of art historian Eddy de Jongh, whose approach was to "read" Dutch paintings as aggregations of icons. He argued that in the genre scenes of this period, there was a strong "tendency to moralize" and a "preference for ambiguity and poly-interpretability."[3] Each constituent part had its own meaning, but these would shift and amplify as they were considered in the context of each other and the environment in which they were found. That is, a misplaced shoe in a bedroom is likely innuendo whereas one left in a courtyard may be inert. De Jongh cautioned that to practice his methodology, one had first to establish that the objects depicted were not simply present in the painting as décor or compositional elements—that there was artistic intentionality.

De Jongh famously argued that artists who intended complex interpretations for their works usually left a visible key (or keys) that essentially encouraged the interpretive process. We can often find such keys in Blackmon's photographs—objects or vignettes that signal the presence of more-than-meets-the-eye content. While not symbols in the traditional sense, these elements certainly invite the viewer to contemplate further the complexity of the

actions and actors in her scenes. In *Holiday*, for example, the visual journey starts with modest humor. A Halloween pumpkin remains rotting on the front steps, even as the Christmas lights strewn across the yard testify to the next round of holidays. The people here must lead a busy life, or at least they do not spend their time keeping a tidy home. The two children in view stir some alarm—the one on the windowsill seems precariously balanced—but they are within the protection of the house.

On closer inspection, alarms begin to sound as recognition sets in that *Holiday* is an image plagued with potential dangers for the children depicted—electric wires, an unattended stepladder, a mode of escape presented in the open garage door. The mounting suspicion of trouble caused by this inventory of prospective accidents is confirmed by a tiny detail—a pair of hands at the crux of the roof. These hands trigger the full potential for disaster. Is that the caretaker, or another child? Is the hands' owner climbing up or falling down? Neither are comforting scenarios. Further, what does it mean when a domestic scene reveals so much potential harm? Blackmon works diligently to ensnare us in just such a conundrum. Without the specificity of meaning that the objects in a Jan Steen painting can hold, the constituent parts of Blackmon's photographs do add up to a whole much greater than their sum. And, like a seventeenth-century painter, she signals to her viewers to look closer and think deeper.

Blackmon's images are more than mere cautionary tales affirming the benefits of good housekeeping. They operate on a much broader level as visual, metaphorical considerations of the emotional complexity of everyday life. She fabricates tales carefully designed to evoke a special kind of realism. In this she leans toward an unconventional branch of cinema verité championed by Werner Herzog. The German filmmaker argues that sometimes to tell a true story one has to make it up. He famously wrote about this approach in a manifesto at the very end of the last century. "There are deeper strata of truth in cinema," Herzog declared, "and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization."[4] Herzog, then, gets closest to the heart of Blackmon's practice. By creating a world that combines fact and fiction, Blackmon reveals deeply felt responses to life as she experiences it, and thereby evokes personal truths.

NOTES

1. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock: Dialogue between Truffaut and Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 73.

2. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

3. Eddy de Jongh, quoted in Matthijs Jonker, "Meaning in Art History: A Philosophical Analysis of the Iconological Debate and the Rembrandt Research Project," in *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 24, no. 2 (2008): 152, note 26.

4. Werner Herzog, "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema," *Walker Art Center Magazine* (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota), April 30, 1999.

Book Club, 2012, archival pigment print.

Chaise, 2013, archival pigment print.

Hair, 2013, archival pigment print.

The Hamster Handbook, 2014, archival pigment print.

Holiday, 2016, archival pigment print.

Homegrown Food, 2012, archival pigment print.

Stock Tank, 2012, archival pigment print.

New Chair, 2014, archival pigment print.

Loading Zone, 2008, archival pigment print.

Peggy's Beauty Shop, 2015, archival pigment print.

Olive and Market Street, 2012, archival pigment print.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

John Stomberg in Conversation with Julie Blackmon

John Stomberg: Your images often seem to capture a moment of clarity in an otherwise chaotic world. Could you discuss your working method? How do you arrive at that moment when multiple sub-themes (or stories) coalesce into an orchestrated, if complex, whole?

Julie Blackmon: In terms of how I'm working, I'd say it's probably closest to how filmmakers work—having an idea of what I want, and then finding the setting, characters, etc., before I start directing and shooting. On a good day, some things happen on their own, and I'm not so locked into my idea that I'm not open to whatever might unfold naturally. Finally, I'm editing what I got for the strongest elements that also all work together for the whole, and figuring out what details can support the overall narrative.

JS: Your work seldom disguises the hand of the director—your hand. Rather, it embraces theatricality. That said, like all stagecraft, the photographs evoke reality. Could you discuss the balance between the poetic and the documentary, which seem to coexist in your work?

JB: When I started, I wanted to document this time of our life (mine and my sisters') when our kids were young, and capture moments that I felt deserved to be recorded. That was my entry point or gateway. So I sort of started as a documentarian, and then eventually, the documentary approach gave way to fictitious narratives in which I exaggerated or stylized some of these scenes. And I think that's because I

realized what writers have always known—that sometimes fiction can tell the truth better than the truth itself. By approaching this work from a fantastical vantage point to these everyday scenes that were part of our lives, I could say more. I wanted to not just make pictures that people liked to look at, but I wanted to say how I *felt* about the times and culture we were a part of. And working this way allowed me to represent reality in a way that was closer to my personal experience. Fellini once said, "The things that are most real to me, are the ones I invented . . . even lies are interesting, eloquent and revealing just as much as what is considered the truth." In terms of the balance, it's not something I'm conscious of thinking about, but it's more like, this is a moment I saw the other day, or an idea I want to flush out—like my piece *Fake Weather*, which I just finished. I saw my nieces and nephews waiting around all winter for snow. It never happened. In fact, the trees and shrubs that normally bloom in April were blooming in February. The new snow boots, sleds, gloves, etc. were a complete waste. And then hearing the EPA (as we'd known it) was now a thing of the past . . . this only added to the tension and a sense of underlying fear and dread of the future. So I started thinking about how to express this visually. And I came across this ad for fake snow. It brought to mind "fake news" and our new current-day reality, so I knew immediately that "fake" had to be a part of the title. So I ordered some fake snow from Amazon. Like, ninety gallons of it. One thing led to another, and the next thing I knew I was making this picture.

JS: To follow up, what about fantasy and wonder? How do they come into play when you organize your images?

JB: I guess I don't usually think about the work being about fantasy and wonder, but maybe it's there, in terms of my state of mind, more than I'm even aware of. In some ways, I'm just trying to charm or delight myself. That's what motivates me to do this work. If it wasn't fun, I couldn't do it. It almost reminds me of how I used to play growing up. The closest thing I can think of off the top of my head is remembering how much fun it was to set up my Barbie scenes. It was much more fun than actually "playing" Barbie. Maybe I'd fill up one of my mom's Tupperware bowls with water, and add blue food coloring to make it into a pool, and then meanwhile one of my brother's G.I. Joes might be upstairs in the bathtub naked (because you didn't have any outfits for him except camouflage stuff). But the fun was in creating the scene. Then once you'd finished doing that we'd say to each other, "Do you really want to play this anymore?"

JS: Could you describe how you work with the people you photograph? Do you specify what each should be doing or do they have more agency for improvisation?

JB: It's a combination of both. I never start any shoot without a list of ideas that I want to try. So I'll direct for a while—long enough that they start to get bored and be themselves. That's usually when I get the best unscripted shots, especially with the kids. But there's really no telling which method is going to capture what you're after (and you're not even sure what this is until you start editing). Sometimes the strongest moment is the one you planned; sometimes it isn't.

JS: Your photographs appear to result from a camera faithfully capturing what went on in front of it at a particular moment. Is this the case or do you utilize any post-production tools to achieve your results?

JB: Of course. I couldn't do this work without Photoshop. Thank you for recognizing it as a tool. That's all it is. But, still, I think we're all a little mad at Photoshop. It's been equated with a lie. To me, it's just a technological aid to tell the story I want to tell. And the way I see it and how I'm working, it's opened up a whole new direction for the medium of photography. It isn't photography (at least as we've known it), it isn't illustration, it isn't painting, it isn't film . . . but kind of all of these things. It's freed photography to become something else. And maybe taken down some of these boundaries between all the different art forms.

But that said, I never want to *highlight* this tool, because it's distracting, like bad plastic surgery or something. So I really try to utilize it in a way that minimizes any kind of "Photoshop feeling." I don't try to put things into a picture that I didn't actually photograph in that exact place. I don't try and create tornadoes or lighting in Photoshop, and don't oversaturate the colors. They can go garish very quickly. I'm using Photoshop in the most basic way. Most of the work happens on the actual set, not in post. There's no gesture or expression you can make up in Photoshop—at least, I'm not aware of it.

JS: Children, specifically young children, play important—perhaps the most important—roles in your *Homegrown* series. They are pre-teens, mostly pre-tweens, whose lives are still heavily shaped by imagination. How does their age contribute to your work? Is it a developmental moment that you are after?

JB: The kids are very important to my work, but less so in terms of my fascination with their imagination (though early on this was an emphasis). But as this color work began to take shape several years ago, and I started figuring out what I wanted to say with these pictures, it began to lean towards social commentary—oftentimes on the conflicting expectations of women, and the stress and chaos of everyday life. I realized that I could say much more about, for example, about the absent mother, by having her not pictured, and the kids became metaphorical for a psychological state in some ways. All these chaotic and crazy scenes were just a vehicle for that. And a vehicle for humor. Their lack of awareness, and their expressions and mannerisms, kept the mood light and funny. Especially kids under five. Plus the size of their tiny frames, visually, just works too.

JS: Since the beginning of photography, practitioners have picked up their equipment and traveled to far-flung locales to find exotic subject matter for their work. You have made a different choice—you focus on the familiar. Yet the result is uncanny and even otherworldly. You find drama, tension, and suspense, all in a seemingly simple scene of children in a backyard, living room, or out and about in the neighborhood. Could you discuss the seeming dichotomy between the potentially mundane subjects of your work and the extraordinary results you achieve?

JB: Yes, most of this work was shot in the neighborhood where I have lived my entire life. I know this might seem to be a limitation—trying to find interesting subject matter in a generic town, with a generic name, that is smack dab in the middle of the United States. But to me, it's all about a sense of place and identity. There's a confidence that comes from living and working in a town you know this well. You understand it. And maybe the conflicting tensions that arise here, whether it's about parenting, politics, or religion, are an exaggerated representation of what is happening everywhere. But it all depends on how you look at it. My mom always used to say, "you've got to take a step back and see the big picture." It's all about that. The perspective. The goal is to find the mythic in all this chaos.

JS: I've read of your interest in Jan Steen, the seventeenth-century Dutch painter of interiors, who often focused on family life. His work often has a moralizing tone to it—that is, the parents in his scenes often come off as neglectful, the children as disobedient, and the revelers as drunks. There are also references to Dutch proverbs laced into the work; some images have specific meanings. In your work too, there are often elements that seem suspiciously symbolic, but simultaneously oblique. What to make of a knife in a watermelon, a boy with a plastic bag on his head, or a child eating the stars section of a flag cake? Could you please discuss your use of these vignettes, and your goal for their meanings?

JB: When I first saw Jan Steen's work, I was struck by how funny it was . . . not so much by the moral he was trying to make (though I'm sure this was his point at that time, as it was with many painters). But his crazy scenes seemed timeless in a way, and the humor almost contemporary, yet these paintings were over 400 years old. So, to see moments that were painted hundreds of years ago, and recognize them in your own life today, that really resonated with me.

The details (or symbols) in my work are more like little charming elements that I think add to the overall sense of the picture. I love

placing a sharp knife in a scene where any parent in their right mind would've never done that. It's the irreverence that I'm after. It's like how we used to sit in church and draw on the church program. We'd scribble weird hairdos on the picture of the minister and give him fangs all during the sermon. And it was the irreverence of it that gave way to our hysterical, uncontrollable fits of laugher. In today's culture, there are these expectations, especially of women, where there's a protocol for how you're supposed to behave. It's almost like there's a script—of what you're supposed to do, what you're supposed to say, what you're supposed to look like, how you're supposed to parent—that makes you want to defy it all.

This interview was conducted via email in April 2017.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works by Julie Blackmon, born 1966 in Springfield, Missouri. Works are in chronological order.

Loading Zone, 2008, archival pigment print, 36 × 46 inches.

Night Windows, 2008, archival pigment print, 44 × 57 inches.

Homegrown Food, 2012, archival pigment print, 44 × 59 inches.

Book Club, 2012, archival pigment print, 57 × 44 inches.

Olive and Market Street, 2012, archival pigment print, 44 × 57 inches.

Stock Tank, 2012, archival pigment print, 44 × 58 inches.

Hair, 2013, archival pigment print, 44 × 44 inches.

Chaise, 2013, archival pigment print, 44 × 57^{1}/$_{2}$ inches.

New Chair, 2014, archival pigment print, 44 × 57 inches.

The Hamster Handbook, 2014, archival pigment print, 44 × 53 inches.

Peggy's Beauty Shop, 2015, archival pigment print, 44 × 61^{1}/$_{2}$ inches.

Holiday, 2016, archival pigment print, 44 × 64^{1}/$_{2}$ inches.

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About Hood Downtown

During the interval of our construction and reinstallation, Hood Downtown will present an ambitious series of exhibitions featuring contemporary artists from around the world. Like the Hood Museum of Art, Hood Downtown is free and open to the public.

Upcoming Exhibition

Resonant Spaces: Sound Art at Dartmouth
September 15–December 10, 2017

Summer 2017 Hours

Wednesday–Saturday, 11:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.
Sunday, 1:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.
Closed Monday and Tuesday

Directions and Parking

Hood Downtown is located at 53 Main Street, Hanover, NH. Metered public parking is available in front of Hood Downtown on Main Street, and behind the exhibition space in a public lot between Allen and Maple Streets. An all-day public parking garage is located at 7 Lebanon Street.

HOOD DOWNTOWN EXHIBITION SPACE