

Gradiva Q&A with Shane Bunnag

Where does the title Gradiva come from?

Gradiva means “She who walks”, in Latin. There is an interesting background story to the name, as a surrealist muse. Gradiva first appeared in a novel that captivated Freud and subsequently a string of artists and filmmakers, such as Andre Breton, Salvador Dali, Robbe-Grillet and Leos Carax most recently. In almost all of these instances it has been associated with the search for a woman, an elusive figure who treads a path between dream and reality, who is both inanimate and animate, a woman stepping out of a marble sculpture.

I’m not drawn to decoding these other Gradivas- suffice it to say I was intrigued by the idea of a fabricated modern myth and that the name resonated well for me in both a figurative and a literal sense.

Where did you take the photos?

Most of the photos were taken in Europe although the process of creating the series took over a year and included many photos taken in Thailand that I didn’t choose to show here. What I wanted to convey isn’t so much about any specific place or setting but rather a more abstract feeling about the natural world. I believe that the images are imbued with a receptiveness to the idea of place and nature that is quite Southeast Asian. The atmosphere, the sensibility, the traces of animism present in these images directly result from my personal experiences in Thailand.

Why did you choose to use both colour and black and white

The “calligraphies” series, which are in black and white, started out as an attempt at a kind of bodily and photographic calligraphy. The body is painted across the frame, the “canvas”, in strokes, with control and abandon competing with each other. I did these over several sessions, spread out over the year- the more I looked at them and reworked them the more they called up to me the marble figure of the woman walking- the idea of Gradiva.

I wanted the black and white “calligraphies” to have a simplicity about them, like charcoal or ink on paper, so colour would have been a distraction.

The photographs in nature, whether in colour or black and white, are not intended to sit outside of everyday existence, they reflect memory and modes of perception or even dreams, with their varying nuances and intensities of colour.

The “blurred figure” seems to be a consistent element in your work, what does this mean to you?

I’ve always been fascinated by the blur in early photography. Due to the chemistry, the long exposures, 19th century documentary street scenes or portraits often had some blurriness- unintentional traces of abstract forms and phantoms, which subvert the image and add a piquancy- it underscores the feeling that what we are seeing is past- that the participants are long gone and the place forever transformed. I find early photography and these incidental details incredibly compelling, perhaps even more than the intended subject.

I believe that the blur actually refocuses our perception and opens it up to more possibilities. The indistinct form calls out to the eye, taunting it. The blur, the imperfection, is something organic and beautiful, impossible to reproduce, each time unique, like looking at smoke or fire.

For me, the “blur” in my work also challenges the notion of photography as straightforward representations of reality. Much of photography I think is about ownership- the attempt to possess memories or things and people by preserving them in a captured moment. So resolution, clarity, accuracy become all important because we think that the most faithful rendition of the moment will make it live forever.

I am much more interested in capturing the seemingly imperceptible shifts between moments, so the blur or motion for me conveys a sense of ambiguity and change- a state of flux, an underlying chaos. Instead of capturing a moment as we would remember, I wanted to question if that moment ever existed as such by allowing the unseen, the obscure and indistinct, even the anarchic, to emerge. So in a sense the images are non-photos in that they don’t attempt to replicate or capture reality but rather disrupt our preconceptions of reality to allow for the otherwise unknowable to manifest.

So are these pictures of ghosts?

That depends on the viewer’s definition of “ghost”. I never intended to make images of ghosts as supernatural beings. However I am interested in capturing what cannot be seen but can be felt, things that speak to us in a more visceral or intuitive way without the filter of language or conscious reasoning. I believe that photography can, paradoxically, capture what can be felt but not grasped.

There is an idea, with which I agree to a certain extent, that photos are not reality but if you take a photo of something unreal you make it real. These images are generally of ambiguities, of things that are just on the edge of perception, and now they are captured and made salient.

