

Greg Allum

Serenade for The Ghost

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Andrea Allan: When did you start taking photographs, and why?

Greg Allum: In 2001 I was in New York with a girlfriend of mine at the time. She lived there; she was fragile from her past, but full of creativity and wide-eyed passion. I, at the time, was in bands in England but had an urge to discover different art forms. I was spoiled by a woman and she, destructively for her, spent all her money on gifts for me. One of those was a 35mm Pentax Camera. We then spent a few weeks running through the streets of New York learning how to shoot.

AA: Who are some of your photographic influences?

GA: In the beginning I was influenced by Anton Corbijn and Linda McCartney, especially when I was shooting musicians. As I developed as an artist I discovered Francesca Woodman, who has been a massive inspiration to my latest project, *A Serenade to the Ghost*.

AA: Could you introduce our readers to that body of work – what is it about, and what are you trying to achieve through these pieces?

GA: *A Serenade to the Ghost* is a series of images that sit alongside a long poem, which is split into seventeen parts. It deals with the emotions of the subject, a non-descript male of an unmentioned age who has lost his partner. It is about loss, the acceptance of losing someone to death, and how one has to not only let go of the physical aspect of burying a body but the emotional side of closure and being happy with that.

AA: Can you tell us what inspired you to take these photographs? Why did the subject matter and locations appeal to you?

GA: I was lost with my art. I had recently finished self-publishing a long poetical novel called *The Sail* that featured illustrations by Polish artist Taxi Taxi. Struggling to be inspired by my photography, I headed to Oslo to meet up with a model – the last roll of the dice, or at least it felt like that. We were lucky enough to connect artistically, and shot in loads of crazy places, such as in attics and an old asylum on the outskirts of the beautiful city. *The Ghost* was born through that meeting; it fell into my lap.

AA: Did you direct your model during the series, or was it much more of a collaborative process? Were you able to feed off each another artistically?

GA: It's a two-way process, or at least I believe it is. I'm not a big fan of directing: the essence of my photography is to try and capture moments that are real. They have a voyeuristic element. So for me, I try to capture the moments between the poses; between the set-ups. Of course, some direction is required but it's loose and open to interpretation.

AA: Throughout the series you use techniques such as long exposure times, double exposures, and a mix of portrait shots. Why did you feel these techniques to be integral to the work?

GA: The series has a lot of movement of emotions, of being haunted and lost. Shooting double exposures on a Hasselblad was a completely new challenge for me. It became a cross between a maths and an art puzzle. Working out correct exposure and winding the Hasselblad back without any movement affecting the film was as frustrating as it was rewarding. As I shot on film there is no way of knowing that what I was capturing would work; I had no point of reference and that was part of the magic.

AA: Were there any particular writers that influenced your style for the text in this work, or the subjects you chose?

GA: I think the obvious one people will say after reading the poetry is Edgar Allen Poe, just for the rhythmic pattern when The Ghost starts haunting the central character. Whilst he influenced me rhythmically I would say I was more inspired by Neruda, Rilke, and E. E. Cummings for this piece, and specifically Jeannette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body*.

AA: Your photographs have strong narratives, and the issues they deal with are very much anchored in the meeting of image and text. Was it your intention to guide the viewer, or let them make up their own mind by choosing which part of the work to focus on?

GA: After the publication of *The Sail* I was acutely aware that I wanted to try, if at all possible, to marry my words with my photographs; something I had never really explored. I still feel the project has an element of lucidity that doesn't force the viewer into thinking one way or another: it is open to the emotions of the individual and their experiences. I feel the work is quite transient in some ways and like I've described my work before, but very much a melancholic sigh anchored with hope.

AA: In employing both image and text do you think that there is a risk of one overshadowing the other, detracting from the end result? In either case, how have you worked to ensure both image and text are considered as a whole by the viewer?

GA: Good question. This is something I can't answer or really think about. I just have innately created this and it feels the flow and structure work. I hope the series comes across as a complete piece that is coherent, no matter how lucid it may appear.