

LOS ANGELES I'M YOURS

The Art Manipulator: An Interview With Jill Greenberg, Part One

Jill Greenberg is very smart. She is a hugely successful photographer who has managed to find notoriety in both the commercial side of photography and the fine art side. She has softened the boundary between art that makes you a living and art that make out of passion. She has made an extremely specific name for herself in the world of photography as her name rings up images of very clean, glossy, and bright photos: they are Jill Greenberg.

Jill has lived in Los Angeles for a little over a decade. She's come a long way to get here, too. "My family's Canadian," she says. "I was born in Montreal and a lot of my family still lives in Canada except my immediate family who moved to Michigan, where I grew up."

"Ever since I was young, I was making art: I was doing photography and sculpture and drawing and even attended Cranbrook, which has a fairly serious art program. I was in the darkroom by third grade! We were doing stop motion animation and the school even has an art museum on campus."

"I've been making art since I was very little," she says with a nod.

"I went to RISD for illustration for pre-college, between junior and senior year of high school. Between senior year and college, I went to Parsons' in Paris to study photography. I ended up going to RISD for college and I had planned on being an illustration major but I ended up in photography. I was really interested in drawing and painting everything back then."

"There's a lot of interesting stuff that I learned," she says, speaking to the process she developed in her education. "Because I'm making pictures all day every day, I'm always practicing my craft. The main thing I learned at RISD was to be visually literate, to deconstruct images so you can communicate what you want to communicate."

This deconstruction of imagery was well suited for how she expresses herself and it still very much is the framework she is working within. Upon finishing college, she spent time in New York and started working immediately. "I wanted to do both art and commercial work when I graduated. I was doing very early digital work in 1990 that involved scanning in body parts and images from men's porn magazines, which were used and I realize is really disgusting now."

She laughs, acknowledging the absurdity in using *used* pornographic materials. That's Jill, though: she has a sense of humor in her work that comes from a need to manipulate and play with things. Her point of view isn't to represent but to make you question representation, to wonder what is real and what isn't. She has been playing in this pen for years—even before she pursued higher education.

"That's why I thought it was fun to call myself 'The Manipulator' in the mid-nineties," she explains. "In photography, people do so much digital imaging. My stuff, maybe in the beginning, I was shooting and putting people in the background. But now, my work is relatively straight: I shoot all of those bears and animals on those backgrounds. I'm not switching heads or changing things that much. I do tend to paint over things, like with **the pig in the Commentary And Dissent show** a few months ago. If you take off the photo layer in that image you can see how many layers of painting there are. It's almost a painting unto itself."

"I've been drawing and painting on my images for years, too. I used to manually do this, taking acrylic paints to my photos. It's interesting because some of these themes in my practice that I was doing in high school and art school are still the themes that I'm interested in. Coming up with ideas isn't a problem of mine; however, I'll think up things and realize they are things that I've touched on in my younger years."

This claim is entirely true. While visiting her at her home, she took out a stack of art journals that she kept in high school and at RISD. The pages are filled with detailed and incredible drawings of elaborate fantasies and often dark subjects. Another tie from her past to present is her recent making of *Teddyman*, a six foot four giant teddybear she's been drawing and redrawing for decades, this creature that represents female loneliness and the comfort of a giant creature. She created a parody of a man. It's an absurdist fantasy realized—in plush.

"Once it dawned on me how the world works and how it seemed very unequal to women, I began to make fun of men and male rage and male culture. It led to drawing photos of rape and really ridiculous themes to entertain myself. There was a while where I showed my old drawings because I like them so much. I still like my old drawings. I feel like they are very close to me, and represent my artistic roots."

"Sometimes I feel that I'm not taken seriously because I do so much commercial work. It's always important to show that I've been sick and twisted—since I was a child!"

She laughs. "Nothing is out of the blue or as if I have all of a sudden lost my mind. It's a consistent point of view. Sure, I'll do some ads for someone else's company. It's cool, that's someone else's concept and I'm very happy to be able to make a living as a photographer."

Of course, she didn't just become a commercial photographer overnight. She has been working for 22 years on it. In the beginning, she actually was attempting to do both, or maybe take a fine art path, when an opportunity presented itself. "I almost got into the Whitney Independent Study program. The day I found out I didn't get it was the same day that I got my first job at *Sassy* magazine. It was good. Making all art is expensive and photography is one of the more expensive forms. So I decided to establish myself and have financial security before I started fully making personal work."

Jill had a lot of commercial success in New York while still keeping a parallel track in fine art work, but it did take the back burner. She did a few select projects since she admits its hard to go full on in both realms. She eventually moved to Los Angeles after realizing New York wasn't the only city for photographers like her. "I lived in New York for almost twelve years. I used to come to LA for jobs all the time and, whenever you visit Los Angeles, you always wonder why you don't live out here because it's so much nicer. Something eventually snapped and I realized I didn't want to live in New York anymore. I felt the only other place I could move was Los Angeles. Of course, there are photographers all over the United States, but I was already concerned about leaving New York as it is the center of magazine publishing and advertising. I do a lot of celebrity and entertainment work already so it made sense to move out West for work."

Moving to Los Angeles has been good for Jill and—in a way—has clarified her work. Personally, she met her now husband about 6 months after moving out West and they started a family. The couple now have two children and literally built their dream home from the ground up in the Hollywood Hills. The house is a work of modern architectural art.

For more on Jill, be sure to **check out her website**. **Like her on Facebook**, and **follow her on Twitter**. You can catch her work at Katherine Cone this Wednesday through for a week as a part of their **Legitimate Rape** show. Jill's book **Horses** was just released by Rizzoli and will include a **solo show at New York's ClampArt** October 18 through November 26, one at **Amersterdam's Jaski Art Gallery** from December 1 through 16, and a **Katherine Cone show** in February 2013. There will also be a **New York book launch on October 19**, too.

By **Kyle Fitzpatrick**
Posted October 8, 2012

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Unafraid To Create: An Interview With Jill Greenberg, Part Two

You can find Part One of our interview with photographer Jill Greenberg here.

Southern California has also had an influence on **Jill Greenberg's** creatively, too. If you look at her work over the past decade, you see a shift from her trademark high gloss photos to some more naturally lit photos that speak to our surroundings. Los Angeles has helped Jill evolve.

"The natural light in Los Angeles is really gorgeous! Having kids also made me start taking a ton of candid photos in daylight, too. I'm finally pushing that in my commercial work, doing more daylight and environmental work. It's so gorgeous and loose and more casual. The light has really affected me a lot. It hasn't spilled into my personal work yet, as in I have not done a series in that manner. The exception is Glass Ceiling, which was in a way about Los Angeles sunlight. I have other ideas but I don't think they'll involve natural light—yet."

You can tell how much Jill likes studio lighting. Her relationship with this style is very obvious given the quality of her work. "It developed over time—and is still developing because I don't want to be pigeonholed by it. The monkeys came out in 2005, which I had been shooting since 2001. End Times—the crying babies—started in 2005 and came out in 2006. At this point, that look is six years old. Sometimes clients want me to do it that way, too. Basically, for the entire two thousands I was working in that style, but also shooting daylight portraits and other styles of studio lighting too. I've been experimenting non stop with lighting because I love it, you have to keep pushing forward all the time, especially for the commercial photography."

"It's really important to show that I do other things—and do them really well, too," she says. "Its crazy: my name has become a description of lighting and retouching—the 'Jill Greenberg effect!'"

Jill also adds that this tension between her photography and commerciality is nice. She is using her manipulating abilities in a very public context. "I think it's really interesting to be creating pop culture. First off, I love being a part of pop culture. I love seeing my work on buildings and billboards. It's awesome—even if it isn't my concept and its for a television show. It is still really fun to photograph people and make photos for a living."

The style Jill is known for is inspired by the End Times children from 2005. She was doing totally different assignment work for the first fifteen years of her career, working with colored gels, slide projections, and occasionally more digital compositing. Her artwork ties to her commercial "day job" work, which has pushed her into some interesting territory we are all familiar with. "Commercial jobs are often big productions. The first time I shot a monkey was for a job with Target. We had to rent her (we also rented a dog and a cat) for that campaign—and I decided to do a quick portrait sitting with her. I found the results so compelling because the monkeys and apes faces were so similar to humans."

"The bears were sort of a reaction to the backlash or controversy surrounding the crying children, and also, since you saw him—a study for Teddyman. For End Times, people got caught up in the idea that I made children cry, but in many cases they cried with no prompting; and their parents helped get the shot, I did and said nothing, of course, just waited. I shot them all in my studio, here. I was being taken down on the Internet and television and called a 'child abuser.' Small children cry all the time over nothing. As a parent we have to make them cry when we ask them to do something they don't like."

"That was quite upsetting and hurtful. It made me go back to animals for a bit, eventually choosing these bears who would ferociously growl into the camera. For me, I was creating an image of the rage that I felt from the anonymous internet. But when I shot them and some ended up looking like giant teddy bears so I had to include those images too. They even sit with their front paws between their back paws! I had not realized that was real. But with animals and children, there is an authenticity of emotion, which is amazing."

"As subtext in my work—which is really obvious—is that I rent and pay for the subjects of my images," she explains. "So partially there is an exploitative/capitalist approach which echoes the world we live in, and its maybe a Hollywood dynamic: everything is for rent here. The recording of property, the putting someone or something in a picture frame for close examination. After studying Semiotics at Brown University, I am quite aware of the power dynamics between the viewer and subject, and the artist and subject. After all, I did hire actors to strip down to their underwear and fight for 'everyonehateseveryone.'"

"That was the first personal series I did with adults. The Glass Ceiling series was also mostly adults, except for one shot of my daughter, which I have not really shown. I have started another series of young children but had to put it on the back burner to finish the Horse book and series. With those I was referring to portraits of the privileged classes and the way we regard our children now, as precious commodities. I need to return to that series since I love photographing children. And I am probably going to be working on some images of men soon, but I am not sure exactly the format. I always joke about exposing the phallus. Since it seems to be the last frontier. I have been doing it a bit in my commercial work believe it or not, and the disruption the naked penis still causes is hilarious."

"The perspective of the female gaze is so interesting and problematic. My show earlier this year in LA, Commentary and Dissent, I felt it might have acted as false advertising. Advertising for nothing. Maybe shock value for a mute generation, since I co-opted the exact techniques I use for mainstream advertising and used them on pieces of animals and repellent actions by performers (of the Upright Citizens Brigade) and so in a way they actively mocked advertising as well as activism, their titles were borrowed from Goya's Caprichos, as well as Monty Python lines. There is a fair amount of absurdist humor in my work. I love black humor."

"The Horse series had a subtext of images of the recording of property, too. The politics of representation, representation of politics...its all super fascinating to me. Even questions about why painters feel the need to repaint a photograph, why isn't the photograph enough on its own.... and why they think its ok to steal other's photography to do so."

These projects have always brought the most fulfillment to her. Some of her commercial projects have had similar results, too. For example, she shot various performers for Upright Citizen Brigade's Dirtiest Sketch Show and ended up with various wild photos, like a man peeing in his own mouth and a man being intimate with the aforementioned pig head. Ironically, this imagery falls into her point of view—especially in reference to her feminist view of men as quasi-children or animals.

"I don't want people to think I'm a deviant because I'm clearly not," she clarifies. "I'm not that exciting: I'm married with two children. But, dark things do entertain me."

How she entertains herself is her art. She makes it beautiful and professional and with a large subtext. She finds that approach to art making is sometimes hard to come by. "There's so much art that doesn't do anything. There's a lot of art that doesn't say anything and it becomes about the process and refers to historical art exclusively almost to the point where the art cannot stand on its own. They require a long description. Does that speak to a viewer in any way? That's a trend right now."

"You can't make art if you're being afraid," she adds.

"It confuses me: do artists enjoy making work that has no visual appeal? Work that is visually about nothingness? How does the artist feel good about what they made? I enjoy making pictures. It's confusing to me that someone would want to make things that have no emotional appeal and that doesn't have anything visual- ugly or not. I could go on."

Jill believes in the power of visuals and the importance of a polish. Art doesn't have to look poor to be respected: art can be beautiful and still be respected. "With the art world, things have to be badly executed. Not 'badly,' necessarily: they can't look polished and well executed. Because my day job is working in advertising where there are big production values, the slick execution of my work somehow confuses people."

If anything, art world trends locally and afar will never change how Jill creates. She has a very clear visual sensibility and approach to imaging. Aside from evolving, Jill will continue making how she makes—and she isn't leaving Los Angeles either. After all, she did build her dream home here.

"I'm planning on staying in LA," she says. "We built our house in 2007 through 2010. It's pretty crazy and in a great location (not the best for kids though since its up in the hills) but we built it to our exact specifications. I feel like we're not going to leave: LA is a good base. I do wish it were closer New York, but I'm not planning on leaving. It's nice here."

For more on Jill, be sure to **check out her website, Like her on Facebook, and follow her on Twitter.** You can catch her work at Katherine Cone on October 10 for a week as a part of their **Legitimate Rape** show. Jill's book *Horses* was just released by Rizzoli and will include a **solo show at New York's ClampArt** October 18 through November 26, one at *Amsterdam's Jaski Art Gallery* from December 1 through 16, and a *Katherine Cone* show in February 2013. There will also be a **New York book launch on October 19**, too.

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