Interview: Photographer Jill Greenberg Discusses Her New Rizzoli Book "Horses"

BY CEDAR PASORI
Contributing writer covering art, style, and music.

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Jill Greenberg's photography has been copied, criticized, celebrated, and adored for being ingeniously controversial and painfully honest. She's photographed everything from magazine covers and billboards for your favorite TV shows to crying children and monkeys. However, if you pay close attention, her work is layered with meaning beyond the surface of anything she does commercially.

Her photographing of animals (pigs, monkeys, cats, dogs, and bears) continues in her latest book, *Horses*, which comes out tomorrow, October 2, through Rizzoli. Featuring an introduction by A.M. Homes and an essay by Greenberg, the book is a closer look at the history and symbolism of horses in ways that deserve your undivided attention.

Where did the idea for the book come from, and when did you start working on it? You mentioned the deal with Rizzoli during your June 2011 talk at the Annenberg Space for Photography, so it seems like it's been in the works for a while.

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> **HORSES ARE PREY ANIMALS. IF YOU WORK WITH PREY, THEY THINK THAT YOU'RE GOING TO KILL THEM AT ANY MOMENT.**

Photo book projects usually take a couple of years to complete, but the time-frame for this one was really compressed. Production was pretty crazy given that I had to create 120 images. It definitely pushed the limits of what I could actually do. Early in March 2011, we got the official green light from Rizzoli that the book was going to happen, so I had to shoot, retouch, edit, and sequence the entire book in one year.

For the textual component of *Horses*, how did you decide to choose A.M. Homes, and how did you decide to angle your own writing in the book?
I think A.M. Homes has a unique perspective and biting sense of humor, similar to mine. She is a rabble-rousing woman, too.

For me, it was really a return to my original muse, since as a young girl I was obsessed with drawing, painting, and photographing horses. I started spending time at stables with my daughter, while she was riding. I was reminded of my love for the form and different aspects of the horse. Then I thought about the bit, halter, and bridle in terms of how we harness and ride this animal. There were a lot of interesting elements to explore. I would spend hours researching online, and I ended up finding this essay by a British academic, comparing the way that horses function in society to the way that women have been oppressed. He had included an illustration of a horse in a bridle with a woman wearing a "scold's bridle," which is a medieval punishment for mouthy women. At the time, I was also working on my *Glass Ceiling* series, so issues of feminism were at the forefront of my mind.

So you were working on both *Glass Ceiling* and *Horses* at the same time?
Yes, I was. I ended up showing the work together in New York and published an exhibition catalogue to go with it. A photograph from *Glass Ceiling* was on the cover, with images from that series in the first pages, and then a cast-glass shoe and a horse bit join the series in the middle. The book continues with horse pictures.

It felt right to compare horses to women. Actually, I spoke at my Alma Mater last year, The Rhode Island School of Design, during Women's Focus Week, and I finagled a meeting with Deborah Bright, who is the Head of the Fine Arts department, since I wanted to ask her about her own work with horses. I said to her, "I don't know what to do, because horses seem masculine to me, but they also seem feminine," and she responded, "Well why can't they be both?" I realized she was right. You know, you want to label things and make an easy categorization, but then it turns out that you don't have to. So that was really helpful, having that quick art crit. I do miss that.

I like how you present it as a paradox, and you don't enforce that you have to pick a side between whether a horse is masculine or feminine, but you point out that there *is* a history. Can you talk about the process of shooting horses in the studio? You have photographs of horses both outdoor and indoor in the book, but it looks like there are also ropes, fans, and significant coloring.
All of the coloring was in post-production. I had fun adding whatever colors I felt like adding. I actually did one shoot of a horse in 2010, just to make sure that I could do it.

There was this horse, his name is Casey (he was in a Beyoncé video), and he lives in L.A. I did one shoot of Casey in an actual studio, but all of the other studio-looking ones were shot in a studio we built in the horse ring. No one would bring their horse into a studio, because they don't want to bring their prized animals into an environment where they wouldn't be comfortable, or where they might panic and hurt themselves.

> ## I WASN'T BORN A COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHER, I WAS BORN AN ARTIST, AND I'VE BEEN DOING ART MY WHOLE LIFE.

So, for all the ones that look like studios, I set up a big piece of white or black fabric in the studio with fences to protect the lighting gear. There were fans for the Casey shoot. For some of the other ones, I was shooting about an hour or two outside of L.A. in this area called Walker's Basin. It's this weird, elevated plain inside of a valley, but it's at a really high altitude. We actually did have fans, but we didn't use them, because it was so windy that the lights kept moving.

The other location shots were taken in Vancouver at Danny Virtue's ranch. Danny Virtue is a big film/horse person, and he just kept making them run around like crazy. It was really hard to follow them and focus while they were running. It's one of the hardest projects that I've done.

Would you consider it harder than *Glass Ceiling*, where you had to go underwater?

It definitely wasn't easy to be scuba diving and trying to focus the camera underwater, but you realize that you can mostly keep the camera at infinity when you're shooting underwater. You do have to keep focusing, and it can be hard to see when you're wearing a mask and shooting a camera in an underwater housing, but the horses were also really dangerous. I feel like they were more dangerous than the monkeys, bears, lions, and tigers that I've photographed. Horses are prey animals, and most of the other animals that I've shot are predators. If you act mellow with predators, they know that they can kill you, so they are cool, but if you work with prey, they think that you're going to kill them at any moment. Because they are bigger and stronger than you, if they get upset, they can just kick you in the head or trample you.

Did you wear a helmet or any protective gear?

[*Laughs*] I didn't wear a helmet, because you know, photographers do really stupid things.

You put your life on the line for this book.

Yeah, all of my shoots have been pretty difficult. Trying to get pictures of kids crying or even monkeys…it's all difficult.

What draws you to such controversial subjects? With everything you do, there's a surface level that could be misinterpreted as all there is to understand. Someone could see *Horses* and think that it's just a collection of pretty painted horses. Do you sometimes feel like these controversial details find you? What gets you so excited about a project that you decide to research it and expose what other people aren't seeing or talking about?

I don't know, I'm just always thinking about things. I have a list of ideas that I want to do for my art series, but I'm always trying to figure out what's going to work. Ever since I was in art school, I would read and get ideas. Sometimes the photograph sparks an idea in me, and I continue in that direction. That happened with the *Glass Ceiling* series and the monkey series. With the *End Times* series, I had done images of crying kids quite a few times, but when I saw them in 2006, I remembered that it was something I found really compelling.

Have a lot of your ideas for fine art projects come to you during commercial assignments?

Well, I wouldn't have had access to the monkey if I hadn't been shooting him for a commercial project. I decided to do a portrait of the monkey, and that's when I decided to do a series of them. For the *Glass Ceiling* series, I don't think I would have necessarily set out to do an underwater photo series. That was definitely inspired by an assignment. I loved the way the U.S. Olympic synchronized swim team looked somewhat ridiculous wearing heels, but as it turns out,

professional synchronized swimmers often wear heels underwater. I don't think the animals were really inspired by a commercial assignment. It's just that I wouldn't have had access to the monkey, and that sort of sparked something, since it was something that seemed new to me. I used to photograph my childhood dog in a very similar approach to how all of my animals are photographed now. I did headshots, where the dog looked like a philosopher — his name was Plato, so I photographed him like he was thinking. It's sort of a continuation of that.

> THERE ACTUALLY WAS SOMEBODY SELLING A WEB VIDEO TUTORIAL WITH MY NAME ON IT, AND I WAS LIKE, 'EXCUSE ME? I'M NOT DEAD.'

How do you maintain and prioritize your fine art career? It seems like on both sides, both commercial and fine art, you're extremely prolific. When you contributed to our "How to Make It" feature, you said that being prolific is your advice to aspiring creatives. How do you find a balance?

Well, I don't think it's about maintaining it. I didn't really maintain it when I was first starting out. When I first moved to New York, I really wanted to do both. I was doing personal work that was totally separate from the work I was doing for my commercial portfolio.

In 1992, I applied to the Whitney Museum's Independent Study program, but I didn't get it that year. Later that week, I got one of my first good jobs for *Sassy* magazine. I thought that I should just focus on doing the commercial thing until I could get to a point where I would have economic freedom and be able to afford to do the personal work. Doing photography is expensive, and I didn't want to wait tables and be a starving artist. I've always liked doing portraits and seeing my work outdoors on billboards, but I've always had other ideas to explore.

In the early '90s, I was doing scanned body parts and playing with digital imaging, but it was hard to do both. It's still hard to do both now. It's hard for me to say, "If I have a certain budget, do I want to do tests for my commercial work, or do I want to spend the money on another personal series?" I usually tend to do the personal thing. My personal work doesn't have anything to do with the commercial work. Strangely, I ended up getting assignments from the crying children series — to recreate that lighting for ads — which I didn't expect at all. I don't do something personal just so I can get commercial jobs.

In the case of the horses, I don't think anybody wants someone painted purple and green. [*Laughs*] I did *Horses* because I wanted to do it. It's hard because the serious art world can be an odd place for the people who have achieved commercial success first. I wasn't born a commercial photographer, I was born an artist, and I've been doing art my whole life.

A lot of your work has spread virally online, and people have reacted strongly on blogs and otherwise. You put a lot of effort into your Facebook page and switched your official portfolio over to Tumblr's platform. Is this out of a desire to connect with people who want to discuss your work?
Yeah, I definitely like doing that, but I've been really confused as to whether or not I should watermark my work. We finally decided to just put the copyright on it, but people can crop the copyright out of course. Just last week, we discovered that some huge Republican donor had stolen one of my crying children images and used it on a digital billboard for "Vote Republican." That was insane.

The crying children images have been stolen so much. For whatever reason, I guess it's a universal theme of a crying child that can be used to illustrate anything. I don't really like *that*, and unfortunately copyright laws don't really make sense, especially in other countries where infringement happens a lot. You're only really supposed to collect the amount of money that you would have gotten if you had licensed the image to these people, but since I don't license those images for anything, it doesn't matter. For a one time web ad, you'd only get $500, so for me to sue somebody for $500 would obviously make no sense, because I would lose a ton of money. The international copyright laws are really frustrating.

It seems complicated. I interviewed Barbara Kruger recently, and she brought up the subject of stealing work, too. Her response to it was going online and finding both major and minor examples of work that copied her style, and she made a piece from that.

Oh, did she?

Yeah, she said it was her reaction to how overwhelming it is, especially since her style is pretty well-defined.

> "YOU'RE NOT JUST WORKING, YOU HAVE AN AUDIENCE.

That's interesting. There are websites where they call it the "Jill Greenberg effect," and there are all of these tutorials where they deconstruct what they guess my lighting to be. There actually was somebody selling a web video tutorial with my name on it, and I was like, "Excuse me? I'm not dead." To see others do it for their work, as far as I'm concerned, it's like taking food out of my children's' mouths. I mean, it just is. When a whole bunch of people started doing it, I was like, "That's nice, but I actually make a living doing this, so if you're going to just copy me, that's not cool."

Do you feel like it pushes you to go into ever-more specific and untouchable directions?

Honestly one thing that sucks about my lighting approach is that it's really expensive. It's a lot of lights and a fair amount of retouching. With the economy being the way it is, it would be nice to come up with a lighting style that doesn't require 8 lights, just for the budget's sake. Sure, I would love to create something totally insane that no one could copy, but first of all, I don't think it's possible.

Also, clients do all these behind-the-scenes videos, and you can look at how other photographers light things from the behind-the-scenes videos. People do it all the time, and that's actually how my lighting style got out, from the Gwen Stefani album cover shoot. I have actually told the behind-the-scenes people to avoid shooting my lighting set-up, but it's hard, because you don't want to seem like a "prima donna" to the production. There's not really any winning. Honestly, I don't even want to be in the video, otherwise I would have chosen to be on the other side of the camera. I just want to focus on my work. It's funny, someone said to me, "You have the hardest job. Everyone watches you while you work." And I'm like, "You're right!" You're not just working, you have an audience. I sort of block that out. Everyone's seeing me roll on the ground. I try not to think about it, and I definitely don't want it on video.

For *Horses*, there will be an exhibit in New York and Los Angeles, right?

Yes, the exhibit in New York will be on October 18 at Clamp Art. There's a big book release at Milk Studios on the 19. I have a show in Amsterdam on December 1st at Jaski Gallery. Then I'm going to have a show in February 2013 at Katherine Cone Gallery in Los Angeles.

You photograph your kids a lot. Would you say that they inspire you the most, and do you find that being a mother adds to your work?

It does. It was part of the inspiration for the *End Times* series. Once you have kids, you suddenly pay much more attention to the future of the planet. The work/life balance is actually quite hard, trying to accomplish so much and move forward with my career, while spending quality time with the kids. Travel is so necessary, and it physically hurts to think about how fast they are growing up and the time I am missing with them. Having kids obviously added a whole new layer to some of my ideas, but I still think certain things are funny that are almost antithetical to being a normal mom. Like the weird, crazy, fake baby that I got online. [*Laughs*] I do it all with a sense of humor, really.