

*Interview with: Todd Hido*



© Todd Hido, 1951, 1997 from "Masses at Night"

*I. Shooting a specific image often means to complete a complex process after a deep investigation. The photographer is supposed to find the subject following too many signs. Those signs are often inside us, many of them come from our past. How is it possible to recognize those signs? Is it possible to explain how every feeling, every memory, can be put together in one single image?*

A firstly let me start out by saying that I completely agree that the signs you are looking for, many of them do come from your past.

But no, I don't think that's possible to put it all together in one single image. If it were then this would not be a lifelong pursuit?

A body of work does not even do it sometimes.

I have noticed that within my own practice that often adding a genre, or another way of taking pictures, often adds an extra layer that complicates things more deeply.

I believe that all those signs from your past and all those feelings and memories certainly come together, often subconsciously, and form some kind of a fragmented narrative. Often you're telling your own story but you may not even know it.

One of my most valuable bits of feedback for me came from an art therapist that I did an independent study with when I was in graduate school.

He taught me that I was on the right track with my subject matter and gave me the confidence to pursue it. What a gift that was in retrospect.

He looked at the beginning of my houses at night, the beginning of my foreclosed home pictures, and the beginning of my portraits—all back in 1995 when I had just two or three of each, and he told me that I was right in the midst of telling the story of my life and that my photographs clearly represented that.



© Todd Hido, 1530, 1996 from "Houses at Night" / 1637, 1996 from "Interiors"



© Todd Hido, 1765, 1996 from "Portraits"

2. The image "Untitled #2312-a, 1999" from the series *Houses at Night* is one of the few images without a visible illumination coming from the house. A beam of light cuts the front of the house but no light comes from the inside. In every house you have photographed the human presence is implied. The quality of the light is also the quality of their presence. Thanks to this perception, you are able to establish a relationship between the viewer and the image, as a personal relationship. Could you explain something more about this particular choice? How important is it for your work to show inhabited houses with human beings' presence instead of empty houses?

You are very perceptive.

Yes, that is the only house at night that does not have a light on the window.

I chose that particular one because it was actually a place that a lot of my ideas about home and loss and longing came to fruition.

That photograph is the only exterior photograph that is taken of a home that is been abandoned. It was taken in the Love Canal, New York.

I used to live in Boston when I went to the Boston Museum school and I would drive from there to Ohio for holidays and visits to my parent's house.

I had always heard of that neighborhood and so I decided to get off the turnpike and go find it one day.

What I found was really remarkable to me as it was a neighborhood that had simply been walked away from by many of its inhabitants.

Not all of them. But most of them.

I find that house I shot to be particularly lonely and it was shot on a Blue Moon in the fall that can be seen behind the clouds and that's where a lot of the light comes from.

That neighborhood was so spooky to me I can't really even explain what it was like to stand there. You felt like you were being watched. But there was no one there except for just a few homes where people were holdouts



© Todd Hido, 2312-a, 1999 from "Houses at Night"

Yes, it's true that most of my photographs of homes at night have a light on in the window. That is a very important part to me as it implies that someone is in there.

I have often said; "The lights come on and the inside seeps to the outside."

The light being on in the window makes the picture more about the people inside—and that is what attracted me to it in the first place. That there was someone there—and I was wondering about what his or her life is like.

One thing that we should say that hasn't come up yet is that all of my photographs are made on analog film with long exposures and there is no lighting that I am adding to the scene.

I do not collaborate or get permission from the owners to make the photographs. I just do it. Also, 99% of the time I am alone when shooting.

Also, I find it much more interesting to simply discover my locations and shoot them then and there.

I'm not the kind of photographer that goes out and creates something from an idea that I preconceived...at least not with landscapes or buildings.

With portraits there's always some kind of collaboration inherent in the process. But we can get to that that later...



© Todd Hido, 2/14, 1999 from "Landscapes"

*3. You often choose the vertical format over the horizontal one. Is there any particular reason (formal or narrative) for choosing this kind of frame?*

Yes, I do often use the vertical format. With the houses I do it quite a bit, and the reason for it is that often times I just wanted to get a single home in the frame. The place seems more isolated that way. Also it was easier to focus the viewer's and my attention onto a single home.

I also like that it shows lots of the sky and lots of foreground and that tends to flatten out the scene and utilize the negative space more.

*4. You frequently have photographed interiors. How did you find the places, do some of them have a special meaning for you?*

Yes, I love to photograph interiors. They often add another layer of narrative to a sequence of photographs. And I really like what that does—it sort of brings the viewer inside of the home. Even though none of the interiors are what is inside the homes they are often juxtaposed with.

It is all just implied.



© Todd Hido, 1447-a, 1996 from "Interiors" / 2479-a, 1999, from "Houses at Night"



© Todd Hido, 1952, 1996, from "Interiors"

I found the interiors in a few ways. Some of them are the childhood home that I grew up in. I grew up in Kent, Ohio. There's a picture of a single pillow on the bed. "#1447-b". And there's also a big console TV that has the light blaring out of it, "#1952", those are both my childhood spaces, where I spent most of my time.

Some of the other photographs are motel rooms that I have stayed in and photographed.

The third place that I find interiors were from a project that I started back in 1996 of foreclosed homes. This was way back before anybody was talking or thinking about foreclosed homes. I have added a few new ones to the group recently and hope to do more.

I am very much interested in the loss that happens in the spaces. Walls do talk.

I was interested in the family drama that had occurred. A lot of my work is really about home and family.

In these spaces I often recognize something of my own unstable childhood in them. Many of the places and people I photograph, resonate with me.

5. You curate very carefully every aspect of your books and exhibitions. Could you tell us a little bit

*about your approach when it comes to creating/editing a book and how different it is in comparison to preparing an exhibition?*

Thanks for noticing how careful I am with those things. It is nice to know that someone sees it. Yes, I think about every single detail of my books, as those are something that I can for the most part predominantly control its outcome

A book is an enclosed and encapsulated medium that you can actually come pretty damn close to perfecting. I also tend to think that the book is sometimes more important than the show, as the exhibit is a temporary thing, often hanging for a month or six weeks and then it goes away.

Maybe a couple of thousand people see it?

But a book is something that I always say is on your "permanent record" and it never ever goes away—so you better get it right!

And I am blessed to have a publisher, Chris Pichler of Nazraeli Press, who allows his artists to do what they envision and to be involved in each detail of the process.

With shows there's always many people involved and you're dealing with several different places, as each and every gallery space is it's own unique thing.

Often the gallerist who is in that space every day is the one that knows it the best.

They know how people walk through a space. What wall the start at, what the site lines are from room to room, etc. They also know the audience who comes in.

So sometimes, they are the one's that layout the shows.

At the Stephen Wirtz Gallery—which is my home base in San Francisco, I have always been very involved in selecting what I show and where each piece goes. Since I live here, I am able to go in and lay my photographs out in the space while I'm actually midway through making them, so I am able to get a feeling of how it will look, and be able to better choose the sizes and layout that I will exhibit there.



© Todd Hido, *Between the Two*, installation shot, 2007

But I also have to say there is definitely value in letting go and having others select your images and exhibit them. It's always curious to me what other people come up with.

As far as putting together the books, I spend hundred & hundreds of hours shuffling around my photographs, making dummies, turning pages, and switching them around and all that. To me that is really the only way to do it, to print the pictures out, paste them in a physical blank book dummy, and turn the pages.

{Oh, and smoke cigarettes, drink wine, and listen to loud music. Very important.} But seriously, that feeling of turning a page and what happens there is something that you cannot simulate on a computer while you are doing the design. It is just not the same.

Also another incredibly important aspect of a successful book is, of course the graphic design. I have always been very fond of excellent graphic design and I have worked with the same designers for all of my monographs, Post Tool Design in San Francisco. I work mostly with Daya Karam and Gigi Obracht these days. David Karam chimes in with his mastery on occasion. {In the past Herb Thornby, Meredith