

**DIGITAL DREAMING: JOHN BONATH'S MIRROR OF IMAGINATION**  
**BY JAN E. ADLMANN**

"I am a magic realist," asserts Denver photographer, John Bonath. Pressed for his singular definition of "magic realism," he said that he seeks "to imbue everyday objects with an 'otherly', magic presence---to consider things that dwell more in the mirror of imagination". 1.

Bonath rightly can envision his work as "magic realist," but, as any knowledgeable viewer of digital photography can see, his style, and his preoccupations and, most of all, his *modus operandi*, leap far beyond the confines of the old Magic Realist traditions, as embodied in the work of such figures as Rene Magritte, Salvador Dali, or Paul Delvaux. (Moreover, Bonath's "magic" has elements considerably in common with the oneiric paintings of very of-the-moment painters like Neo Rauch or Peter Doig.)

Traditional Magic Realism (and Surrealism) was an artistic vein wherein "magical" elements or illogical scenarios were rendered in hyper-realistic style. Classic examples are the hallucinatory, otherworldly landscapes of Salvador Dali, the moonlit, somnambulist scenarios of Delvaux, or the horrifying decrepitude visited on "ordinary" people or things by Ivan Le Lorrain Albright.

It is well and good if Bonath chooses to identify with such famed painters of the imagination, but his work, by virtue of his mastery of digital photographic potentialities, can easily place him in other painterly milieus. Some of his images evoke the hellish visions of, say, Hieronymous Bosch. Still other images seem to reference Netherlandish, early Renaissance portraiture, while still more works, both portraits and still life compositions, position Bonath as a 21st century "mannerist" artist in the gorgeous but chilly vein of the Florentine, Agnolo Bronzino.

As Bonath says, "the computer allows me to manifest anything that my mind can imagine, in ways heretofore impossible in...previous processes of photography". Bonath's vision quest takes him far beyond the literal photograph, by virtue of this virtuoso manipulation of composition, perspective, texture and color. "*I want to take advantage of all the considerations a painter would take.*"

This artist's thoroughly painterly approach to his subject matter--whether mundane or fantastical--is immediately evident in the body of images he calls his "botanical studies". In works like "Pink Daisy", or "Kleenex Carnation", for example, the ostensibly artless, head-on image is, in reality, the result of many hours of digital conjuring of "painterly," or at least "design," decisions. "My imaging is not concerned with accurate replication," he maintains; Bonath insists that he looks at the flower motif (or any other subject) solely for its "potential" as a springboard for enrichment through imaginative manipulation of his artistic means.

Bonath's "Vanity Portraits" ("Man in Blue, Michael Rolf Ensminger," "A Taste of Chemo, Self-Portrait," and "Woman with Black Polka Dots, Marina Graves," for example) strikingly appear to derive from the artist's sharp-eyed study of some of the great Netherlandish masters of Renaissance portraiture. Echoing not just the classic poses of such portraiture---usually a profile or three-quarter head and upper torso, often presented as though poised in a window embrasure---Bonath most tellingly also repeats their customary, razor-sharp details and their intense, glittering, vitreous color.

As in the paintings of the great Van Eycks, or Van der Weyden, or even the German master, Albrecht Dürer, the observer feels it may be possible to count every hair on the lady's venerable head, or in the gentleman's beard. In the "Chemo" image, where the artist gesticulates like one possessed, the details of the demonic finger-and-ear tips seem to have been *whittled* to fiendish points.

Adding to the occult, obscure atmosphere of many of Bonath's "Vanities" are such curious details as the quivering "bubbles" in the images, elements clearly meant as symbolic but, as in much of the art of the forgotten past, this is symbolism lost upon the present-day viewer. That inscrutability, moreover, is the very essence of much "magic realism," bearing out the famous dictum of Georges Braque that, in art, the only thing that matters is the thing you cannot explain.

Constantly, in the entire body of Bonath's work, the viewer can only marvel at the uncanny intensity of his color. The satiny jacket of Mr. Ensminger (textured to an amazing degree, due to manipulation after the fact) has the profound depth of the finest Russian lapis lazuli. "Marina" is enveloped in a marvelous, red robe with all the fiery glow of pagon-blood rubies.

“Distinguishing imagination from perception,” as he has put it, Bonath can spend anywhere from minutes to many hours infinitesimally tweaking his color, texture, line, perspective and volume. “Some images are very much like the original shot and only have color correction...but, even in such,” he continues, “I may aesthetically redesign a fold...or other, very subtle things to get the image to...crystallize to the desired end.” The operative word here is “crystallize”; Bonath’s photographs are almost invariably so hard and crystalline we feel they might shatter at the merest touch.

That oddly “mineral” quality in Bonath’s substances and surfaces, a sort of eerily obdurate materiality, not unlike marble or *pietra dura*, is the aspect of his work which further allies him with still another brilliant, intensely *bravura* epoch in the history of art, that of Italian Renaissance Mannerism.

In such complex constructions as “An Open Heart is a Blessed Heart,” “Casey’s First Day in Paradise,” or “The Apple,” Bonath, in a decidedly “mannerist” way, offers the viewer a tableaux of such intricate, hermetic symbolism that we must surmise that these images likely stem from an interest in complexity for its own sake. These complex narratives, provocative as they are, ultimately defy comprehension. As was so often the case in classic Mannerist art, *enigma* is the one, true subject in such visionary work.

In so many of Bonath’s (apparent) allegories or visual riddles, he is asserting a purely aesthetic ideal, in a style of the utmost refinement, which values decorative elaboration, variety and virtuosity of technique above all else. The potentialities of digital manipulation, we can well imagine, would have had staggering appeal to such ultra-refined artists as Bronzino and his fellow Italian Mannerists.

Like so many of them, in still another respect, Bonath seems bent on devising subjects or motifs that stray--sometimes quite far--from the “normal” ; strange, or a least *unexpected* aspects of a subject are emphasized. Such is certainly the case with outre images like “The Whisper,” “Life Force,” and “Moulting Man #1”. The mise en scene in such images is deeply personal, the obvious preoccupation with the flesh and musculature of these nudes unabashedly erotic.

In these nude images, and in the series “Portraits from the New Age,” additional dominant themes, of compelling, primal urges and darkling scenarios, seem to surge to the fore. Bonath has acknowledged the influence of the writers Yuko Mishima and Hermann Hesse upon his thinking and his work... “In both,” he says, “I relate to the multi-faceted nature of the human psyche, especially the subconscious, and the primal nature of the human spirit...the male and female aspects that dwell within each individual”.

Especially “primal” and psychologically unsettling in many of Bonath’s more haunting images is the bizarre integument, like dried, cracked mud, which encases many figures or faces. (To achieve these effects, the photographer uses a complex process directly applying a solution of ceramic “slip” and successively going through wetting and drying stages---as well as intensive digital enhancement.)

Bonath addresses the homo-erotic aspect of some of his work by saying that any work perceived to be of such a tendency “has a deeper connection, to concept, idea or metaphor,” which surfaces throughout his work. “All my work is sensual and all sexuality is sensual, including obsession”.

The explosion of technical (i.e. primarily digital) advances in photography has obviously vastly enhanced its expressive spectrum, to a nearly immeasurable degree. All this quantum change means that digital photographers, like John Bonath, differentiate from one another almost limitlessly. And, as borne out in Bonath’s extravagant oeuvre so far, every digital photographer may develop differing emphases, differing pictorial strategies, in the course of his own evolution as an artist.

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1. All quotations derive from 2008 E-mail exchanges with the artist.

\* Bonath’s “Portraits from the New Age,” particularly, have the scary effect of “The Portrait of Dorian Gray, from the famous film. Important to note, moreover, the frightful “portrait” of Dorian Gray was created for the film by the arch “Magic Realist” artist, Ivan Le Lorrain Albright.