

Interview by Robert Enright



## The Revolutionary Two-Step ●○○○

An interview with Barbara Astman

When Toronto-based photographer and teacher Barbara Astman first picked up a Polaroid camera in 1977, it was a fortuitous meeting of artist and technology. Astman found the immediacy of the camera suited the quickness of her mind and her need to see the operations of that mind take form as quickly as her thoughts had taken shape. It also facilitated the use of the artist's own body as the subject of her art. Throughout the following 27 years, Astman has continued to use her body as both object and subject. The "body of work" that has come out of that engagement is remarkable for its elegance, clarity and intelligence.

It is also notable for its beauty, although I am aware of the pratfalls in using that designation. As Astman herself points out in the following conversation, the term has been used against her almost from the first time her "Visual Narratives" were exhibited in 1978. This series of self-portraits, in which Astman typed cryptic lines on the Polaroid below her image, were dramatic and smart mini-narratives that functioned as if they were the beginnings of a filmic storyboard. They revealed a good deal about the strategy of combining images and words,

but on the surface—and there were commentators who were prepared to go no deeper—they also showed a darkly attractive young woman who had no hesitations in using the medium of photography to hint at a personal story fraught with complicated emotions. Looking back on this early work, it seems skilfully balanced between revelation and discretion; what looks hot at first glance reads much cooler upon consideration. By the time she made the "Red Series," 1981, the cool had taken over; these finely composed images in

*Dancing with Che*, 2002, from the series "Dancing with Che," giclée print, 37 1/4 x 36 1/2".

following page: *Untitled*, from the series "Scenes from a Movie for One," 1997, edition of 4, Ektacolor Mural.





which Astman posed, cut off just below the eyes and the knees, surrounded by and holding everyday objects, make you think that El Lizzitsky was a props coordinator for an abstract, non-linear and autobiographical movie. Astman has impeccable taste and in this body of work, she clearly had her designs on beauty.

Designing beautiful images has been a persistent attitude throughout her career. In recent series she has both returned to earlier work and developed new images that further elaborate her hold on this aesthetic terrain. In "Scenes from a Movie for One" from 1997, she rephotographed, as Polaroid close-ups, images she had taken in Paris in 1982. The resulting images, shown separately and in groups of 32 and 48, are evocative and strangely provocative as well. Astman has said that she wants "a certain seductive level" in her work, and these scenes fulfil that intention. They also underline how consistently she has used her work to develop visual narratives. She has stressed the private nature of these performances and the "movie for one" fits that bill. As it's being made, Astman is herself the producer and the solitary audience for the performance.

In her most recent series, a collection of 31 murals called "Dancing with Che," 2002, Astman invites another performer on stage, although the nature and the location of his appearance is unorthodox. The figure of Che Guevara, the legendary Cuban revolutionary with the movie-star good looks, became Astman's dance partner in the form of an image on a white t-shirt. The artist, who is largely cropped out of the frame, leads a dance in which Che's face is blurred, attenuated, distorted and obscured by the movement of her body. The single images are compelling; in horizontal groupings of four they become a film caught in a freeze-frame.

They are also a frieze that catches and holds an aesthetic moment. Astman's "Dancing with Che" reiterates the answer to Yeats's rhetorical question: in this fancy two-step the dancers and the dance are indissolvably linked. It's a dance that never stops.

*BORDER CROSSINGS:* Why was photography the art form you chose to work with so many years ago?

BARBARA ASTMAN: I was in a program for silversmithing and design at the Rochester School for Technology in the late '60s when I came up to Canada. It was the time of

the Vietnam War and I got very involved in student protests and realized that what I was creating had no relevance to my life. I was accepted at Ontario College of Art and Design and actually went into the sculpture department, a natural progression from silversmithing and design, because it dealt with materials and with three-dimensional space. I had completed a series of earthworks made from aluminum and I wanted to document them along the shore of Lake Ontario with water coming over them. So a friend lent me a camera and I used up half the roll of film and I took the camera back to where I was living and thought, I have half a roll of film here, what do I want to do with this? and I just very instinctively started acting out. I started performing for the camera. I considered it a private performance. I was never interested in doing things publicly. There was actually a eureka moment. I realized this was the medium that made the most sense of all the ideas I'd been dealing with and all the concepts that had been going through my head.

*BC:* What was the nature of the performance you were doing?

*BA:* It was sort of pre-Cindy Sherman stuff. My studio was my bedroom in a rooming house on Beverly Street and I started dressing up, putting on masks and acting things out. I put a sheet up against my wall and stood in front of it and started moving and blurring images. I realized there was something in it that was speaking to me in a more direct way. From the beginning, it seemed absolutely natural to sew and glue things onto the images, to cut them up and reassemble them. I guess that partially came from my sculptural background. I always thought of the photograph as an object; I never thought of it as a flat, two-dimensional surface. It was very much about image and object-making for me.

*BC:* Were you only using yourself as a model back then?

*BA:* Mostly. The images where I'm covered with a big weather balloon are some of the very early stuff. That's when I started performing with props and costumes and where I take on other personae.

*BC:* Was a sense of narrative also implicit in those images? When you say you were performing for the camera, did you have a story idea behind the performance?

*BA:* It was about taking myself outside my own culture and my own persona, and trying to become somebody else. I saw that through a combination of dressing up





preceding page, top:  
*Untitled from the  
 "Red Series,"* 1981,  
 Ektacolour mural,  
 48 x 48". Collection:  
 Kitchener-Waterloo  
 Art Gallery, Kitchener,  
 Ontario.

below: *Untitled from  
 the "Red Series,"*  
 1981, Ektacolour  
 mural. Collection:  
 Government of  
 Ontario, Toronto.

and covering up, you can be whomever you want to be. But a narrative structure has always been very important for me. I'd say most of the work has some kind of narrative or story, something that started me going. It's rarely about just seeing something and wanting to photograph it. With the "Che" series, I was thinking about what that experience meant to me. We just flew back from Havana on Sunday. This is my third trip back and I'm trying to figure out what it is about this incredibly poor country that is so utterly seductive to me.

BC: *Have you got a handle on it yet?*

BA: Absolutely not. I feel like a North American white woman. It's not that I'm a fan of Castro's. In his time he was tremendously important, but now the revolution is past its time. You come back with a sense of a really interesting culture that is in poetic decay. I don't have to live in those buildings, but as an outsider looking in, they're absolutely beautiful. There's a lot of guilt associated with those feelings. It's like loving the wrong thing or the wrong person.

BC: *Korda's photo of Che is one of the most famous revolutionary images ever taken. What was your attraction?*

BA: It wasn't until the first time I went there that I was virtually inundated with a plethora of Che images. I have slowly been putting together this interesting collection of Che paraphernalia. On this trip I found Che jewellery; other ladies wear diamonds, I wear a Che ring. I have coffee mugs, I bought folk-art pieces. I also have the mass-produced products—key chains and T-shirts. I kept thinking about Che as a Pop culture icon. I got way beyond his being the revolutionary leader because when you see him on people's chests and on coffee mugs, it's almost like seeing Mick Jagger.

BC: *Has his meaning also morphed in Cuba? When he wears his beret in the Korda image, he is explicitly political. Is he turning into a popular cultural icon with different meanings in Cuba?*

BA: He's becoming more of a consumer product. That's what the North American public wants, so they make these objects to sell. But he's still seen as a very important revolutionary figure when he appears on the sides of buildings, either in welded steel or in huge stone murals where his face is the size of a four-storey building.

BC: *Unlike Castro, he hasn't aged; he's still young and romantic and represents all the ideals of the revolution.*



BA: Exactly. The image I used was on a child's T-shirt and the reason I was attracted to it is that he's not wearing the hat. I thought, this handsome, sexy man looks like a movie star. If I don't think about cultural history and just look at this person, he's the embodiment of what I was feeling in Cuba. Music is everywhere, the people are sexy and they move their bodies in ways that I can't begin to understand, let alone begin to move that way. So I was caught up on both levels: I was thinking about him politically but I was also thinking about this gorgeous man as a Pop culture icon.

BC: *You've described this sequence as a private performance in which Che becomes your dance partner. When did you decide you wanted to ask him to dance?*

BA: I started wearing my Che T-shirt in a casual way and I caught sight of myself and realized that as I moved, my body animated his face. I started thinking, I'm bringing Che alive. I'm resurrecting Che. I bought some music when I was there, which I'd been playing at the studio, so I arranged a little area, set up my lights

and the Polaroid camera on the self-timer, put on my Che T-shirt and some black tights because I wanted the bottom part of me to disappear. There are actually over 200 shots because it took me a long time to get comfortable. I thought, what am I doing, this middle-aged woman wearing a T-shirt and prancing around the studio? I started feeling the absurdity of what I was doing but then I thought, to hell with this, get over this fast and get on with it. As I'd shoot, I'd tack them up on the wall and I started to see the power of his face as I moved and animated it. It wasn't so much about having to see my dance movements—and, in fact, the ones I used are images where I'm moving more than I'm dancing.

BC: *The malleability of his face is quite striking in the series.*

BA: Exactly, and it's my body causing it to be malleable and that's what I found interesting. Without me, he couldn't do that, so that's why I started to think I was dancing with Che. I was definitely leading.

BC: *So you've really been seduced by Cuba?*

BA: I have. I'm very aware of the huge problems. There are sex tours to take advantage of child prostitution. Everybody is waiting for Castro to pass on to see if there are going to be positive changes. They're ready for a marketplace economy. Some people just talk the party line, but those who open up agree with the revolution but say that change is due. Lots of positive things came out of the revolution; they have the highest literacy rate, they have a great medical system. My understanding is that the people in the country still love Castro and continue to live in the moment of the revolution, but the urban people—the writers, the thinkers and the cultural workers—are ready for a change.

BC: *I want to go back to the "Scenes from a Movie for One," which is also sequential. Was it your return to using yourself as a subject after a number of years of not doing that?*

BA: Oddly enough, that was a piece I had shot way back in 1982 in a hotel room in Paris. I was under extreme

32 Frames, black and white, from the series "Scenes from a Movie for One," 1997, black and white transfer print on artist paper, 30 1/2 x 44".



emotional duress and I shot these Polaroids of myself, and when I got back to Toronto I shot copy negatives and printed them up as black and whites. I just couldn't deal with them at the time, so I put them away. Then, when I started doing "Scenes from a Movie for One," I pulled out all those images and I was absolutely ready to confront them because for me they were very emotional. What I did was take the black and white images that I shot and went back in with my Polaroid camera and did close-ups.

BC: *So a close-up of your mouth or a portion of your body have been reshot from the originals?*

BA: Exactly. I wanted to reconfigure them, I wanted to scratch and introduce colour through the Polaroid process and I started layering and layering the Polaroids. I wanted to somehow intensify the image because they were emotional for me in black and white, but other people might think I was just making faces for the camera. It was reworking part of my own archive, so instead of going to a public archive to get images for collage, I was going back through my own archive and digging out these images. I would look at them periodically and then put them back in the file folder and say, I don't want to deal with that just now. I don't know what changed in my life, but at some point I picked them up again and I was ready to deal with them.

BC: *Now, "32 Frames" has to do with film language and perception?*

BA: Exactly, and I did some as individual images and I did some as groups of 32 and 48, where they become more like filmstrips and you go in and out of either the face or the shoulder. Close up or far away. I wanted there to be a sense of the body but with enough abstraction that you're not really sure which body part you're looking at.

BC: *Your work has always seemed to be about the difficulty of recognizing what is beautiful and how it operates. Is that still a concern of yours?*

BA: I want there to be a certain seductive level about my images. That is something that interests me. Beauty is such a loaded word in the art world right now and it has been used against my work in the past. I kept saying I'm defending beauty. I don't find it weakens work conceptually. I think it can work in conjunction with whatever are your conceptual issues. I always have to remind

myself that everything is cyclical and to just hang in there and keep making my artwork. You're going to have your moment of glory and then you'll be forgotten for a while and then you might rise up again. I think part of my problem was the baggage of being a young, female artist. I would be putting packages together for curators and critics and every once in a while I'd stop and read the reviews and I realized they would describe me in every review. I wasn't taking portraits of myself, I wasn't trying to show the world what I looked like. I didn't think about it when I was in my 20s because I was just so happy that somebody was writing about the work.

BC: *Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann were victimized in an earlier generation for being beautiful women who used their bodies as instruments of artmaking.*

BA: There are still issues around the female nude, it's still a sexual object, and people can't seem to separate from that. Even when you try to discuss the body in other terms, it comes back to that.

BC: *You have been an interesting combination of a camera artist with a strong intellectual rigour who has also had a fine sense of design.*

BA: I don't really proceed with anything until I feel the idea has struck. I'm not interested in shooting just for the sake of shooting. I've never done that. I don't carry my camera around and just shoot things. I'd actually rather be in a place than document it. For me the physical experience of being somewhere has always surpassed the documentation of that experience. Going back to those pictures I took in Cuba, I know that technically and aesthetically they're beautiful images, but being there was so much more meaningful than looking at the pictures.

BC: *Back in the mid-'70s when you were doing black and white work, you talked about the necessity for "an element of confusion" in your visual narratives. Is that still a necessary part of your aesthetic?*

BA: I've never liked a literal narrative, or even the structure of how you sequence images. There are times when you want to do something just to throw things off. I think that chaos and confusion are interesting, I like complexity and that goes right back to Havana. I understand that's part of my attraction to the place; it's so complex that I can't get a handle on the whole thing and that's what draws me back. ■