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### Interview of Rachel Brown

Muriel Adrien

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# Interview of Rachel Brown

Muriel Adrien

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## Introduction

- 1 Rachel Brown's talent as a photographer emerged in her forties when she came to Ireland from the United States where she is from. Her Donegal series has had the most profound and wide-ranging impact, because of the way it resonates with that county, its people, its remoteness and melancholy. Ireland loves nostalgia, she says, and the market for it is bottomless. The country is pervaded with longing, reverence for past sorrows, homesickness when absent from it. And indeed, Rachel Brown's photographs often record the beauty of Irish nature and things about to disappear.



A Shop in Gortahork, ©1987 Rachel Brown

- 2 Rachel Brown's most prestigious work has been the collaboration with Nobel-prize poet Seamus Heaney, but her most unusual work by far is the Women's Wing series, where she photographed, using pinhole (sténopé) cameras, an old mental asylum about to be demolished in the Pyrenees (France). It is a technique that breaks with the highly-controlled process of traditional photography and leads into a more unknown realm, its unpredictability causing a possible high failure rate and astonishing unimaginable successes. The sténopé boxes—at times circular—curved or warped the perspective, its misshapeness reflecting the deformed vision of the inmates or of the authorities who defined insanity. Her pictures combine Alice in Wonderland distortions with Gothic horror and somber gravity.



Door into back garden, window, ©2005 Rachel Brown

- 3 The dark gloomy building itself acted as a camera obscura, with its very fine streaks of lights forming pools on the floor as oval as the white bathtubs meant to soothe the inmates. These very bathtubs seem reminiscent of the darkroom trays in which the developing process takes place.



Baignoire, ©2005 Rachel Brown

- 4 Her pictures often seem drawn to dark full volumes cast in immensities, like camera obscuras in the distance, and are revealed by the texture of white and black brush strokes, whether with the pinhole camera or the shimmering veins of the sea.



Winter Solstice. Dún Briste, a sea stack. ©2001 Rachel Brown

## INTERVIEW

Can you tell us about your family background?

My father was from old New England families: sea captains from Salem, Massachusetts, textile manufacturers from Rhode Island and central Massachusetts, going back to the 1620s, with one Nipmuck Indian in the mix who forever left the stamp of her features on us. The Nipmucks were a large tribe in south-central New England. My father was a rebel and became an anarchist at age 17. As a pacifist at age 19, he joined the Norton Hartjes Ambulance Corps during the First World War, met E.E. Cummings on the boat going over. They were both arrested by the French government under suspicion as spies because of some pacifist declarations in letters my father wrote to various people including Emma Goldman. Cummings was totally innocent. Their experiences in a notorious French prison in Normandy, La Ferté Macé, are described in a marvelous book by Cummings, *The Enormous Room*, in which my father appears as the character B. He then went on to become a writer and an alcoholic. His time was occupied by one or the other until he joined Alcoholics Anonymous at age 50. His writings were mostly juveniles, non-fiction, magazine and journals and a single novel. He was best known as a valued friend of the literary and art figures of the early 20th century in both New York and Paris, especially Hart Crane, E.E. Cummings, Malcolm Cowley, Djuna Barnes, Dawn Powell and many others

of that generation.

My mother was the daughter of Polish Jews who immigrated to the US around the turn of the century. A large family of 8 children, they lived in South Bend, Indiana, where the father worked as a tailor in a department store. They were very poor but most of the children succeeded in getting a college education and going on to enter various professions. All in all, a very good story about immigration to America. My mother became a modern dancer and went to New York City to join the Martha Graham company. While she was a person of great energy and verve and had many admirable qualities, she was highly temperamental and difficult to live with. I was often exposed to dance through her work as a dancer and later a teacher of both modern and ethnic dance, and I love to dance myself, but I don't think there is any dance influence in regard to my photography.



Ulster: Girl Dancing, Fermanagh. ©2003 Rachel Brown  
*"This is the only dancing picture I made." Rachel Brown, 1 Feb. 13*

My parents met in Greenwich Village, New York, both of them moving in the bohemian cultural circles of the time. They never married, at least to each other, though my father married two other women over his long life. (He died at age 100.) I was born in 1936 in NYC, but my first memory of meeting my father was at age 4 when he showed up with a broken leg, needing a home and a drink. After that, he lived with us for 7 years. We moved to Cape Cod when I was 6 and this has remained my actual and spiritual home. My father had a son by his first marriage who was eight years older than I but he did not live with us and my relations with him were never very warm. He became a well-known sportswriter but died at age 47 of a brain tumor.

My mother was a very restless person and we were always moving around so I grew

up more or less everywhere from NY to California. By the time I graduated from high school, I had attended 13 different schools. My father believed that educating women was a waste of time and money and would not support my further education, so as soon as I graduated, I went directly back to Cape Cod and began raising a family after making a very stupid marriage, followed 3 years later by a more sensible one that lasted 33 years and included 5 children, four sons and a daughter. I am now very happily married to a French artist I met on an art project 20 years ago. Because I started family life very young, by the time I was 40 it was possible for me to think about a career.

What was your training?

I had very little photographic training. A friend showed me how to develop film and make a print—I believe it was of a nest or an egg—highly symbolic of a new beginning but done without forethought of that. Just as I reached 40, a good friend, Melissa Shook, who was teaching photography at MIT in Cambridge MA suggested that while I was thinking about what career to pursue I could take her course in basic black and white photo, we would have fun together, go to lunch, etc., so I agreed. I worked with Melissa and a group of youthful MIT students for a year, learning basic darkroom techniques, then worked at home. I later took a summer course in platinum printing, but that's all the formal training I had. It has been my general observation that a person can learn all the technology there is and accumulate all the latest equipment and still not be a good photographer, while others with no training at all can produce the most amazing pictures, sometimes with just a cell phone.

What are your influences?

I think the earliest influence was the pure magic of photographs, all in black and white of course, that I fastened on at a very early age. I always loved photographs, but never ever thought of becoming a photographer myself; it was some sort of magic that some people were capable of, but I never imagined myself being able to do it. I frankly think that painting and drawing have been greater influences than other photographers, but there are many photographers that I like whose work is nothing like mine, but who inspire by the depth of their ideas and feelings. Likewise, there are a few I dislike intensely. That list is shorter: Ansel Adams, Cindy Sherman, Edward Weston who strike me as being too narcissistic and empty as artists, and most photographers who work in lavish color formats. I am ambivalent about Diane Arbus and Salgado, but think their work has great importance in understanding human nature; we must closely examine our responses to what they show us.

The ones I especially like are the great French trio of Atget, Lartigue and Cartier-Bresson (Atget has been a huge inspiration to me; he is so full of feeling for light), Robert Adams, Roman Vishniac, Helen Levitt, Cristina Garcia-Romero. Walker Evans was one of my earliest interests.

You've always photographed places abroad, and hardly ever photographed America



and Cape Cod, which you say is your home place. Why is that?

Cape Cod is indeed my home place. I like the little towns of the outer Cape, the small harbors, the interesting people—their character. The air is wonderful, salty, marine, organic. But I don't photograph it because it's been photographed to death. I find a lovely scene but there are already a dozen people there photographing it.

When you are traveling, the newness helps. When you are a foreigner, you see things that are commonplace to the locals in a fresh way.



The Postman, ©1987 Rachel Brown

How did you come to Europe?

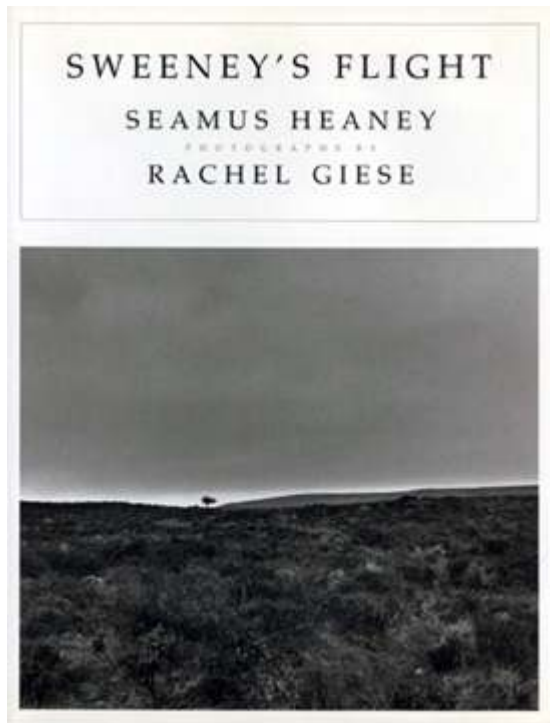
I started going to Ireland around 1976 after seeing a photograph of the coast of Kerry and felt immediately drawn to the landscape. I had been interested in Irish literature for a while so I thought I'd take a look by bicycle. At that time, I was just starting photo studies with Melissa Shook and had no intention of doing photography on this trip. I did take a camera but on the first day, it fell off the back of the bike and broke, so that was the end of it. I was so enchanted by Ireland that I continued to return every year for longer periods of time. I was drawn to the way the light of Ireland gets soaked up by the earth, and the precipitous and dramatic way the weather changed. It is also drenched in history and every stone has a story. One of my favorite writers about these aspects of Ireland is Tim Robinson.





Clouds. Flying Cloud. ©Rachel Brown

Around 1977, some friends on Cape Cod who had a cottage in Donegal offered me its use. This was my introduction to the place where I would find the greatest inspiration. I also met wonderful people there and soon felt part of the community. One of the inhabitants was a very young Donegal poet, Cathal O' Searcaigh. (He writes mainly in Irish Gaelic and has been called by a fellow Irish poet "the poet who put the 'gay' in Gaelic"). We became great friends and he was my guide and interpreter every time I went to Donegal. My first published book of photographs was a collaboration with him of poems in Irish, mostly about the area: "Suile Shuibhne", which means "the Eyes of Sweeney". Sweeney is an important character in Irish myth/legend who will pop up again in my work with another poet.



In 1992, I chose to strike out on my own and moved entirely to Ireland, this time to Northern Ireland where I was working on a photo project about the North. I had by then published two more books : Rachel Giese : The Donegal Pictures (1987) with an introduction by the Belfast poet Ciaran Carson, and Sweeney's Flight (1992) with the poet Seamus Heaney who later won the Nobel prize for Literature in 1995.

As fate would have it, a year later, I met Daniel Dejean to whom I am now married, on an art project for 10 invited European artists on the subject of migration, but I continued to live in Ireland while he lived in France. After three years, love won the day and I moved to Toulouse, France, where he lived and had a young daughter. My work field now became France and Catalunya where we had been on the migration project. There is a fantastic art and nature center way up in the Pyrenees near the Andorra border where artists and scientists such as botanists, geologists, ethnographers and so forth can board and do what they want. I love this place. On the migration project it was an example of the many near-abandoned villages from which all the young people have emigrated. Only three or four houses were still occupied by the very old. Now the village is bustling with the art center, artists and writers who have moved there and a few holiday homes. It still retains its haunting antiquity, however, and the area continues to be a rich source of images for me.

Do you think there are American features in your work?

I suppose it is inevitable that an American sensibility shapes my work—we are embodiments of our culture. I asked my (European) husband if he sees American features in my work and he was very enlightening. Sometimes we don't see ourselves in ways an outsider might. He mentioned several elements of American character that probably have some relevance to my work. One is a historic American preference for realism: broad landscapes, portraiture, ships, cattle, architecture, even sporting

events. Modernist ideas in art and literature came largely from newly arriving immigrants and were quickly adopted by American counterparts, but realism has held its place and photography is, perhaps, its most obvious expression. Consider the paradoxes that are Robert Frank, a European, and Diane Arbus and Edward Hopper, both Americans and ultimate realists yet considered highly modernist.

Is there an American style? I think American photographers have a looser attitude, capable, even, of productive, meaningful messiness. The idea of perfection is not so important. Most of my own photographs are at the studied, orderly end of the scale, but not so classically "perfect". Americans seem to go for the sociology; Eugene Richards, Eugene Smith and Nan Goldin for instance, exemplify photography of trouble, violence and suffering. The WPA photographers of the '30s and '40s captured a vast and beautiful archive of sociological photography. Now, the vibrant new movement toward the spontaneous is producing wonderfully fresh images. I think digital photography is making this possible. I don't enjoy doing digital photography so I don't do any serious work in this medium.



Field Work. Stepping Stones in a Bog, Connemara. ©2003 Rachel Brown

Can you please tell us about your collaborations with writers?

I have always lived among writers, love poetry and literature, and most importantly, I apply the idea of reading to photography. I think that's why it differs from painting: different parts of the brain are at work. I have no scientific proof of this yet, but I do believe we read a black and white photograph; the image presents a visual vocabulary and you must extend your thoughts and imagination beyond the surfaces (ciphers, if you will) and search for meaning. A black and white photograph is very far from

reality, much like the written page. We make it "real" mentally. Roland Barthes is very good on this subject.

When I judge one of my images in the making in the darkroom, I ask myself: "Is there a poem in this?" If the answer comes back no, out it goes, right into the rubbish. An image must have poetry of some sort.

I met Seamus Heaney and his wife Marie through friends who knew them well. They had shown the Heaneys my Donegal work before it was published. Seamus became interested in what I was doing and kindly agreed to write a blurb for the book. A couple of years later, he asked if I would like to collaborate on a revised edition of *Sweeney Astray*, his book-long adaptation of an ancient Irish text about the life of Sweeney, one of Irish myth's hero/anti-heroes (much is paradoxical in Irish literature), that he had previously published, this time with photographs. I spent about 4 years working on this project and it was finally published in 1992. I knew both Heaney's text and the Ulster landscape well and it was a joy to do.

Mary Oliver. We were very old friends going back to the mid-1970s in Provincetown, a beautiful place rich with artists and writers. I am a great admirer of her work, especially the earlier work. When I was putting together the *Solstice* book I asked her to write the foreword as her writings about nature are so—well, poetic. I was hoping she would write about the importance and meaning of the solstices but she chose to write about Ireland instead, a place she has never visited. You can't tell a writer of her stature what to say, and I was grateful that she did it.



Winter Solstice. Man standing before the waves. ©2001 Rachel Brown

Can you tell us about the Women's Wing project in St. Lizier?

This project was totally unexpected. We had visited the building once with a friend, Emmanuelle Garnier, who was able to get access to it. It had been locked up since 1964 when all the patients were moved to a new facility. As we were wandering through it in hushed awe, I muttered that someone should do a photo documentation of it before it was rehabilitated as condos or whatever was planned for it. Several months later I received an email from Emmanuelle saying that she'd secured permission for a photo project and some money, and could I do it for € 2000. I said yes.



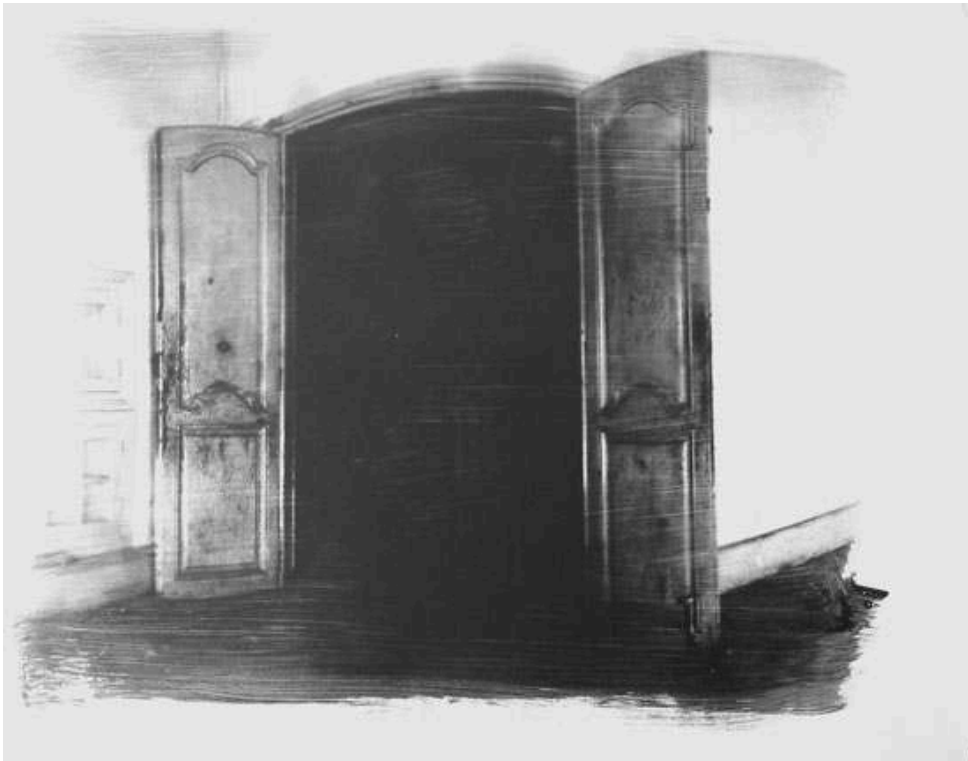
Arched dortoir II, small sun patches, ©2005 Rachel Brown

Although I had never made a pinhole photograph, I was intrigued by the possibilities and thought it a compatible medium for the subject. I connected the pinhole "look" with the haunted, deserted, centuries-old mystique of the building. With some trepidations about the likely chance of total failure, I wrote to a friend who is an expert in pinhole photography, Marian Roth in Provincetown. Help, help, I said, Marian, how do I do this? She was wonderful, and step by step through emails she walked me through the process and shared her lifetime of knowledge and experience to dodge pitfalls and enhance success.

I know a lot of photographers have done abandoned buildings but I have not really studied them, nor did I want to before plunging in. This one was mine. The only exception to this was my discovery of the drawings and paintings of Van Gogh from his time in the asylum at St Remy. Here was the first hand expression of the experience in these generic institutional buildings, remarkably similar to each other.

What drew you to the Women's wing?

I had a gut response to it, the sheer photogeneity of the place, its mood—so weighted, heavy, impenetrable. It was a very dark place, with a lovely light filtering through barred windows. I thought the patients must have really cherished those rays of light. There had also been a men's wing and a small one for children. I had great interest in the history of the place. Maybe some women were there simply because they were pregnant or incorrigible, but most seem to have had serious mental problems, according to a history of the asylum that I referred to while doing the photography. I have no idea whether the Clarisse (Poor Clares) nuns who served there were kind and understanding, or harsh.



Door into dark stairway II, ©2005 Rachel Brown

"Behind this dark door, there was a stairwell where women would throw themselves to death. Afterwards it was barred, as were the windows of the place."  
Rachel Brown, 1 Feb.13

When you photograph, what are you after?

First, I know what I am not after. I have trouble with color photography. I don't understand it. I just can't get beyond the surface. My imagination is just stopped. I can't get into it.

Even though I love Helen Levitt's black and white work, I think it lost its poignant energy when she turned to color.

Secondly, photographing people is not my forte. I am so admiring of those who have that gift. My friend Melissa Shook, for one. She's very empathetic, she makes people feel at ease, comfortable. I don't know how to open them the way she does. Another example I can think of is Vivian Maier. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivian\\_Maier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivian_Maier))

Her archive was just recently discovered. She was American-born but lived much of her childhood in France. A nanny in the 1950s to the 1980s in Chicago, she took photographs on her days off but never showed them to anyone. Her photographs of people are so alert, sensitive, affectionate without being maudlin.

Landscape works better for me. I pass a place, I want to come back to it. I read about its history, and then it's a slow contemplative process. I am often looking for traces of human activity in a landscape, a kind of historic interaction, how one affects the other. My series Field Work is the most obvious expression of that concept.



Field Work. White Stone Alignment, Connemara. ©2003 Rachel Brown.

I believe photography must do more than just report or duplicate: it must carry some other meaning. It has to provoke some kind of idea. What moves me are effects of light— its transforming power, be it for faces, mountains or water, the elements.





Snow. Hillside at Daybreak. ©Rachel Brown

- 5 "I took this photo for the incipient light on top of the mountain. I like the incipience of things." Rachel Brown, 1 Feb.13

Rachel Brown currently lives in Cape Cod with her husband, Daniel Déjean, a painter.

Her website:

<http://www.rachelbrownphoto.com/html/Books.html>



Photo by Nathalie Dupuy.  
Rachel Brown at work on pinhole camera project.

*Muriel Adrien wishes to express her great gratitude to Rachel Brown for this interview and the permission to use the reproductions of her photographs.*

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## INDEX

**Mots-clés :** Cape Cod, Cathal O'Searcaigh, Ciaran Carson, Donegal, EE Cummings, Ireland, Mary Oliver, Melissa Shook, Ordre des Clarisses, Rachel Brown, Seamus Heany, solstice, St Lizier, sténopé, Sweeney, Vivian Maier

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