

Joanne Leonard, author of *Being in Pictures: An Intimate Photo Memoir*
University of Michigan Press, 2008
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Q&A with Joanne Leonard, author of *Being in Pictures: An Intimate Photo Memoir*



University of Michigan Press: *How did the idea for putting this book together come about? When and why did you begin to create “Being in Pictures”?*

Joanne Leonard: I wrote the book to tell the story of the images. The picture selection came first. It took me more than a year of sorting and deciding to create the set of photographs in the book.

Then I learned just a little bit about a digital page layout program so I could place images and text in relation to each other on page spreads. This way of going about things surprised my editor who expected a manuscript and a set of photographs that a designer would fit together later. But once I got started, my editor’s help was very important. She made crucial suggestions about how to keep the text and images in balance—too much writing, we found, overwhelmed the images. The photographs came almost entirely from everyday moments, and with the photographs leading the way, the book became a memoir. Because a good deal of everyday life usually goes unpictured, what is unusual, ultimately, about the book, is how much is revealed about ordinary (and often shared) experiences.

UMP: *On the cover of the book is a dream-like image, titled, “Romanticism is Ultimately Fatal,” of a knight and the figure of a woman on a horse seen through a window. Why did you choose this particular image for the cover and frontispiece of the book?*

JL: It’s one of my most well-known images, and is central to my life and work. It’s also one of my favorites, although I made the photocollage at a time of great turmoil—the end of my marriage and the end of some of my romantic dreams. It also marked a professional turning point for me, because it was included in *Women of Photography*, a historical survey, in 1973. Fifteen years later it was chosen for inclusion in a new edition of *Janson’s History of Art*, a milestone for me and for all women artists, because the previous editions of this classic textbook had not included work by a single woman.

UMP: *Would you mind talking about some of the photographic techniques you’ve used and/or returned to over the years?*

JL: Much of my later work combines photography with collage, and I began working in this medium in the era before digital photography and computer programs like Photoshop. Sometimes I had to invent a technical solution to get the look I wanted—like making layered, transparent collages. The book describes these predigital solutions—darkroom techniques combined with direct cut-and-paste means of making photocollage. It also talks about my use of chalk pastel and of gouache paint in certain works.

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UMP: Your photographs seem so private, or they seem to provide a glimpse of something very personal. You speak of “intimate documentary.” What do you mean by that term?

JL: Usually there is some distance (both economic and geographic) between where the so-called “documentary photographer” lives and where she or he makes photographs. When I photographed, I was often at home (if not my own home, then the home of family or friends), and what I wanted to photograph were aspects of everyday life (my own and that of others.) That “close to home” photography about ordinary daily life is what I had in mind when I used the term “intimate documentary.” The subjectivity, autobiographic, and personal nature of this intimate documentary needed its own term because the term “documentary” was freighted with notions of ethnographic data, objective truth, realism, historical accuracy, and other social scientific notions that were taken up by many photographers who thought of themselves as documentary photographers.

UMP: The pictures of people sleeping are really haunting. How did you begin to take pictures of people sleeping and what does the sleeper or dreamer represent for you?

JL: Possibly every photographer yearns to be the “fly on the wall”—to be present without having one’s presence disturb or change the scene at hand in the least. The chance to observe without being observed is rare, and even more so, the chance to be a photographer with camera in hand and go unnoticed. Photographing sleeping figures fulfills the desire to take pictures when the subject does not react to the camera, does not know she/he is being photographed. Taking such photographs feels intimate (and sometimes erotic or transgressive)—and the results are sometimes very beautiful because relaxed, sleeping beings are often lovely.

I didn’t set out with any conscious intention to develop a set of photographs of sleepers. I made the photos and then began to notice when they started to add up to more than just a few. I’m very fond of this set of photographs and have built several collages on the photographs. The sleepers become dreamers, and I use collage to suggest their dreams (and nightmares).

UMP: The images you made after your miscarriage are really stunningly intimate. How did you decide to make such private things public? It must have taken a lot of courage. Was it healing that motivated you?

JL: The March of Dimes reports that approximately 1 in 4 pregnancies end in miscarriage; some estimates are as high as 1 in 3. Many women have multiple miscarriages. Yet the subject in art has been virtually taboo as have been other aspects of women’s reproductive lives, even pregnancy. Women who have seen my piece “Journal of a Miscarriage” have expressed gratitude for seeing such an important and often secret aspect of their lives represented in art.

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Also things have actually become far more conservative in the museum and publishing worlds in the 35 years since “Journal of a Miscarriage” was made. For most of that time, it was not possible to show or publish the work. But since the early 1990s bits of the work have been published in four different books. In *Being in Pictures*, the entire work (30 images) is published for the first time, and in full color. While I was personally devastated by the losses represented in the Journal, I’m very pleased to see the work published at last. I’m at a point in my own life that is 35 years distant from the emotions of the days when I made the Journal. I have become convinced it is strong work and feel more grateful than brave about its being, finally, beautifully reproduced and reaching so many women (its special audience), artists, and other interested readers who will understand, welcome, and celebrate it.

UMP: What does Sontag’s observation, quoted in your book, that “there is no difference and no aesthetic advantage between the effort to embellish the world and to rip off its mask” mean, and how does it relate to your work?

JL: I used this quote from Susan Sontag in connection with a discussion about a picture of my sister and her children. I wrote, “I would forever fail to live up to the idealizations (or in Sontag’s words, the ‘embellishment’) of motherhood and family I created in many of my photographs. A perceptive viewer of these photographs may see through them (or, to use Sontag’s words ‘rip off [the] mask’) to a more difficult reality, a more complex notion of motherhood that lurks at the edges of the image on the page.” Sontag is saying that the very act of paying attention to something by photographing it will cause it to seem important (the embellishment) while also causing greater scrutiny (the ripping off of the mask). By using the term “no aesthetic advantage,” Sontag is saying that an artist armed with a camera as a tool is equally equipped to make something look “more than—or more wonderful than—real” or to expose the supposed “reality” of a photograph as false.

UMP: Who or what are some of the main influences on your work?

JL: I’ve learned from a few teachers but also had to go around and past problems in education that meant there were few models of female I could follow. The paintings of Mary Cassatt and the photographs of Dorothea Lange were important in my early formation as a photographer. I’ve also been influenced by art that predates photography by centuries, including medieval art, and by artists of the Bay Area where I studied and worked as a young woman. Hollywood and the movies probably fostered my uses of fantasy in collage work. The women’s movement in the arts (from the 1970s) was very important, and that movement particularly supported and encouraged me when there was not much in the “art world” that seemed supportive of female artists.

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UMP: *The theme of twins and twinning runs throughout your photographs. What is it about twinning that you find so compelling? Can you give us an example or two of how this theme appears in your work?*

JL: In the book, I describe how having a twin was a source of great support—especially an identical twin. We are both artists. Photographs themselves are perhaps “twins”—they mirror “reality” and duplicate it. In certain works my sister’s image stands in for my own. I’m fascinated by family resemblances, something that no doubt stems from so often being compared to my twin I use these resemblances in my photographs and collage works. I explore problems of separation (conjoined twins) and of merging identities—themes that perhaps interest me particularly because of my being a twin.

UMP: *It sounds like you lived a bohemian, at times difficult, life in Oakland. Did you decline help from family and friends? And if so, how did this affect your photography?*

JL: I have never had or even wanted fancy cameras. I usually had only one camera and bought my darkroom equipment used. I worked in the darkrooms of other photographers who gave me things like outdated materials and used photo trays. In the beginning I had darkrooms without running water (once in flats without any hot water at all), but because I was young and optimistic, it did not seem too daunting. I had what I needed and was proud of making do. Some of what was hard matched ideas I had about what artists must do to get by. And there were advantages. I learned a lot from working as a photographer—if I had not had to work, I might not have had those learning experiences. And, as a woman, eventually the photography gave me a very important way to earn a living that was not more (or even as much at times) than a waitress, salesclerk, or secretary would make but gave me a greater sense that I was moving toward my goals as an artist, not having to dig my way out of jobs that often stereotyped and limited women’s opportunities and their senses of agency and control over their own lives.

UMP: *How did you manage the problems and pressures of career vs. family?*

JL: One reason the question is so difficult is that after all is said and done, I prospered as an artist and educator because I did not entirely give myself over to traditional roles as mother and homemaker. Yet my daughter and I missed out sometimes when family moments competed with the demands of teaching or of pursuing my artistic work. I feel sad remembering the push and pull, the pressures of work to which I succumbed, and the things at home I did not give myself over to—there probably is no perfect balance. Certainly I have not found it.

UMP: *Did your photography become political or social commentary at one point? If so, why?*

JL: In the 1970s, feminism and the women’s movement in the arts stimulated, provoked, and validated what I was doing as an artist and gave me courage to keep on making art in

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an era when women art students were often not taken seriously by their professors (who were usually men.)

Feminism is a politics. Coming of age in the activism of the 60s and Vietnam era marches and protests led me and other women to the women's movement of the 70s and to feminist critical analysis that led the way and made space for the art that was to come. Today there is a lot written about the "age of memoir" but the way for this age was paved by the work of a lot of women in the arts who were tired of being invisible and made the "personal the political."

Read more about *Being in Pictures: An Intimate Photo Memoir* and see some of Joanne Leonard's work at www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17538