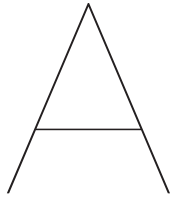




An Interview with Evergon

by Sheilah Wilson





s Roland Barthes articulates in *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), Evergon's images speak to what "has been." He reminds us that the photographic language includes love, the erotic, and the implication of the viewer as part of the relationship. Barthes dedicates the book to the *true* image of his mother. Yet he does not show us this image. The difficulty of the photograph recalling something exactly and the need to find yourself through the photograph; these "problems" add to the allure of photography. The image becomes a way to populate and prove that *this* has existed, and by extension, *so have you*. Evergon uses this implicit quality of the photograph as invitation to make visible unseen worlds of *truth* and *emotion*.

As you look at the trajectory of Evergon's career you realize, the important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation. Evergon makes images to allow in an undiscovered member of the family.

I asked Evergon what he sees as the point of photography, and he answered, "To have a *séance*." Indeed—a meeting created out of the need for new documents of connection and memorial.

Sheilah Wilson: What drew you to photography in the first place?

Evergon: When I was an undergraduate I worked in the United States every summer at a restaurant, and a waitress there had a camera for sale. I bought it and then took summer courses at RIT to learn how to use the camera. The camera was so old that it didn't have an f-stop and shutter speed system that matched a contemporary camera. I learned very quickly to gauge the day and the light. Up until that time I had been taking the traditional mediums such as drawing, painting, etc. and I just fell in love with photography. So, it all starts with this funky old camera.

What were the first images that you remember taking?

Fire hydrants and manhole covers. At RIT there was landscape and swamp, I wasn't interested in the new buildings. The first projects I remember were manhole covers in this swampy area.

As a gay man depicting sexuality and queer desire through the body, your work offers new narrative potentials and a radical way of framing desire and identity.

I outed myself in photos before I outed myself in reality. I wasn't sexual until after I left RIT, but I did have men in some of the final thesis work who did model for me. You know, my brother was gay. But he was high drag. When he went out he always looked like a woman. He would cross the border all the time, and all the border guards knew him as this eccentric woman. So, that was why I never identified as gay. I didn't look like *him*. The thesis, because I didn't know what I wanted to do when I started it, and didn't want to get hemmed in, ended up being about a woman called Doris. It goes full circle, because I actually asked my mother, but she wouldn't do it because she was terrified of my father. So my mother said no, and regretted it all her life. When my father died that is when my mother asked to be photographed by me.

I wonder about the changes in the technology, and how my relationship with the medium has changed with the rise of digital imagery. Has your process changed, do you feel a shift in relationship to the material practice?

So I have gone through so many of the processes, or rather the processes have gone through me. Black and white, non-silver, Polaroids, copy machine, digital color ... I really felt betrayed when Polaroid stopped producing. I so enjoyed the fact that the making of the image occurred simultaneous with the using of the film. I am still searching for a new medium. I may go back this summer and

look at the boxes of collage supplies I have had in storage. At the moment I have gone back to the 4 x 5, and then they go through digitizing and cleaning and back to chromagenic to be a traditional c-print, but I feel compromised in my process by the changes.

How do you feel about the acceleration of the image that is occurring, and what this means for photography?

For me the "selfie" is the ultimate. You can just have yourself in all of these situations constantly. Ultimate acts of self, all coming from the digital world. The problem is that they all start to look alike because there is no other reference than self. I think one should enjoy it for the moment, but I would hate it if it went on forever. I mean yesterday I was looking at this selfie of someone with Kate Middleton in the background, and it just becomes this form of visual trophy.

The idea of our experience being tied to a photograph is not new; however, I see a remarkable degree of self-curation and creation of identity and life through massive amounts of banal documentation. We are always having to prove that we are somewhere, with someone. And, at this point, with the camera outstretched we can be the ones to document our own decisive moments.

The only stable thing is arm's length. You can shoot anything that you can get in a photo. You can document a hunk next to you who is jogging. But once you have done that, then what?

It strikes me that you don't have to engage with another human to get your photo. The unknown and randomness of the image that is taken by this stranger is eliminated.

Yes, not like the old days when you had to look around for the person who looked the most honest to take your photo with your friend. I have to admit I miss the idea of duration through a project and through work. I mean, for myself there are some projects I have worked on for seven or eight years. Then I can be done with them because there just isn't anything else to say or make. But I miss that depth with this constant onslaught and rapidity of the image.

Do you think a radical potential exists within photography?

Well, the students will always come up with something, but I think it is a pretty tired medium at this point. I think that digital came so fast that color and black-and-white photography really don't exist anymore. If there is going to be any renovation, it will be in the digital world. I just don't think they will spend the money on re-inventing or investing in the product. There has been such a retreat of product available.

How do you feel this relationship of the medium and lived time function together? Barthes speaks about photography's uncanny relationship to death, and that which has been, but photography often heralds the newest advances in technology and is constantly being rebirthed. It clings to the present while simultaneously knowing it is already of the past. I am curious how you feel about this, since your own work often holds paradoxes together (I am thinking here of desire and decay, or the personal and the universal spiritual, body and object).

The *Chez Moi* series is about the death of my third husband, which is its own journey down memory lane through all of those objects that are of him. I was listening to CBC, and they were doing a series called *Gay & Grey* out of Vancouver; and some were very positive, and others were doom and gloom. Then there is the politic of this idea of the older gay man: what do you do when you aren't part of that young and attractive demographic? I like to work on the fringes.

That points to our societal obsession with being photographed when you are beautiful and young.



Page 46: *Squash* from the *Chez Moi* series, 182.5 x 112 cm, Ink jet print. **Page 47:** *Raise Ups* from the *Chez Moi* series, 182.5 x 112 cm, Ink jet print. **Left:** *Ramboy in the Nursery*, 1991. 55" x 66"; Silver Gelatin Print, Selenium Toned.



Left: *Margaret Standing (Front)*, 2001, 229 x 122 cm, silver gelatin print, selenium toned. **Facing page left:** *Homage to Chiaruzzi, Zeus and Ganmede or Contrapuntal*, 2006, 60 in x 44 in, inkjet print.
Facing page right: *The Maid & the Black Cat are Dead, Evergon*, 2001, 140 x 168 cm, silver gelatin print, selenium toned.



I mean I know my body is not the ideal body. Maybe that is why I am flaunting it, because you don't see enough of *this*. My body is becoming my mother's body.

I have been really struck by the manner in which your work contemplates the body. It has not stopped but has indeed widened to include the body of your mother and your own body over time, with a continual investigation of the possibility of desire and homage through the body captured. There is something very uncompromising in the way in which the body confronts the frame and the viewer. I see the same energy in the way in which your mother confronts the camera.

Yes, she commissioned me, you know. I have had people ask me how could you make your mother do that? And I just laugh and say, "well, she threatened me, she made me do it." I think it goes back to the thesis project when I couldn't photograph her because of my father. It was her desire all those years to be the nude mother of the son. Those images were taken twelve days after my father died.

The photograph as an act of defiance?

Yes.

It exists in this tangible form. Do you see it as a mask, a mirror?

It is so many different things. I see old lovers in the photographs and some of them are dead and they are there in eternity and they don't get old like I do; they don't keep up with you. Right now I have this portfolio out of my mother, and so she is looking at me. If you look at the images online now, you see Margaret in the big chair, and then the next one you see me in the chair. Before the one with me in the chair, I actually documented the chair without anyone. That is probably the next photograph it is important for me to print. It's been a year since Margaret's death.

I like this idea of the imprint of the person existing on the object of the chair.

When I came home to photograph the empty chair, it was a week later, because I had taken her home and stayed with her. During that time, everything had strangely died.

Still life.

Nature morte.

Sheilah Wilson was born in Caribou River, Nova Scotia. She is a multidisciplinary artist currently teaching at Denison University in Ohio.