



New Jersey Shore Image, Funtown T-Rex, Funtown Pier, Seaside Park New Jersey, Split Toned Silver Gelatin Print

## Nightfall in the Suburbs: A Conversation with Michael Massaia

Wendy Erickson and Tom Gramegna

*They gathered at the back of the gallery space. It was a chilly night but they were there to talk about photography and see prints. Big prints made using platinum and precious metals. Gallery 270—20 miles from the hustle and bustle of Manhattan—had closed for the evening, but there was excitement in the air—a photographer was going to speak about his prints and they had a private meeting with him.*

*They pulled their chairs close and waited, enthralled with the creative possibilities of photography and the vision of this already legendary young man. He spoke gently about his photographs, his life in photography and his process...*

Self taught and extremely well versed in the science of photography, Michael Massaia—thoughtful, confident and inventive—makes his photographs while most folks are asleep. Usually out with his camera between the hours of 2:00 am and 4:00 am (before the sun rises) most people attempting a creative endeavor would be trying to stay awake with coffee. Instead Massaia is wide-awake, solitary but not lonely, not far from home in Suburban New Jersey.

Massaia's photographs are both formal and expressive, most often sharing a non-empathetic view of the



*Seeing The Black Dog, New Jersey, Two Peterbilts, New Jersey Turnpike, Platinum / Palladium on Mylar*

subject matter in the photograph. It may surprise you to learn these photographs are not random—they are carefully planned well in advance, often drawn out on paper, consciously and meticulously designed before camera and film even get on location. These seemingly simple scenes are completely under the inventive control of the artist.

With a quiet willingness to speak about his work and his singularly different approach to making art, he is not a fan of ‘artspeak’ but he readily talks about his process. A true craftsman, he works alone in his studio and in the field. He is quite technical, mostly using 4x5", 5x7" and 8x10" large format view cameras and sheet film to make his originals, and he just built an 11x14" view camera from spare parts. Michael is heavily involved with making split toned silver gelatin prints, using gold and selenium toners. He uses an im-

agesetter to create high-resolution large format negatives for his platinum prints, many up to 32x42" in size. Double coating his paper (Somerset Satin) gives him the beautiful rich warm tones and wide latitude seen in the prints. His platinum prints are among the largest in the world, with the greatest tonal range in the history of the medium. Here is part of our conversation with Michael Massaia.

**Wendy Erickson:** So you don't sleep much...is this just the norm for you? Do people make too much of this?

**Michael Massaia:** It's become very normal. It's something I've simply learned to accept. My inability to sleep has allowed me to develop a very intimate relationship with time and place that is simply not experienced by the majority of people. It's gotten to the point



Seeing *The Black Dog*, New Jersey, *Soldier Trucking*, New Jersey Turnpike, Platinum / Palladium

where I wish the nights wouldn't end and when I start to see the sun come up, I do anxiously look forward to the next sleepless night. I think people (including myself) make too much of it sometimes. I can go very long periods without sleeping. It's common for me to print 60-80 hours straight. I will nod off a little after a run like that, but after an hour or two of sleep, I'm good to go again.

**Tom Gramegna:** When people look at your prints, they always talk about the “glow” or ethereal ‘look’ that is uniquely yours. Have you gotten to the point where you can see a scene, and visualize that glow, or is it ever a surprise when the film is developed?

**MM:** I always see the scene/visualize the idea before I start working on a particular portfolio or print. I have a very strange way of working, but it produces a predictable result, which is crucial to how I work. Know-

ing “how and why” from a technical point of view is very important to me. I always aspire to leave nothing to chance.

**WE:** Because you are self-taught, some might consider your work ‘outsider art’ but when I look at your prints, I see influences from the entire history of photography—I’m not sure how that is possible. Has your recent research into photo history affected your work in any way?

**MM:** I don't think so. I'm simply chasing the ideas I have, and I'm trying everything I can to present them in original and graphically new ways. I don't ever want to get caught up in the history of anything. While I have great appreciation for what other artists and photographers have done in the past, it ultimately is useless to me, because what excites me, is what *hasn't* been done.



*In The Final Threes, New Jersey, Oradell Home #1, Oradell, New Jersey, Platinum / Palladium on Baryta Paper*



*Afterlife, New Jersey Shore, The Music Express, Casino Pier, Seaside Park New Jersey, Platinum / Palladium*

**TG:** You have an interest in photo realistic paintings—I would like to know more about that.

**MM:** The thing that always fascinated me about photo-realist painting wasn't so much the technical virtuosity, but the mindset of creating something that reintroduced the viewer to the ordinary. Making something compelling, that most people would consider trite and not art worthy, was in my opinion, a tremendous achievement. Surveying the area around you and picking up on that one thing that nobody has ever given a second look at, and then figuring out a way to visually present it as compelling, is extremely challenging and difficult.

The validity of this way of thinking was in many ways confirmed to me through photorealist painters like Ralph Goings and Charles Bell.

**WE:** There is an intense skillful technical aspect to your work that is an integral part of what makes your work unique—you have perfected negative exposure and processing, you researched chemicals and processes, built your own cameras, double-coat your own platinum paper—your hand is seen in everything you do. This is extraordinary in the 21st Century.

**MM:** It's very important to me, for there to be validity in what I do. For me, that means doing everything myself and seeing the entire process through from beginning to end. I don't feel it's extraordinary, I just think it's difficult, and as the saying goes "the difficult thing and the correct thing are usually the same thing."

**WE:** Music is part of your life. You probably know Ansel Adams was a musician, also the two men who invented Kodachrome film. I find that sometimes



*Afterlife, New Jersey Shore, The Funtown Pier, Pre-Demolition, Seaside Park, New Jersey, Split Toned Silver Gelatin Print*

making music is sometimes part of a photographer's psyche, is it like that for you?

**MM:** I'm not really sure. Music came to me in a very similar way that photography did. For no apparent reason, I just started writing music, which led to hundreds of pieces of piano music, and then one day, I just stopped. I'm no renaissance person. I get completely absorbed with what I'm doing, but I cannot multitask creativity. It's a bit of an extreme method. All or nothing, with no middle ground or balance.

**WE:** Personal failure to you would be professional triumph to some other people. Are you too hard on yourself? Does it keep you going?

**MM:** I'm hard on myself. Failure is a constant that I try not to run from. I've learned that failure is truly a division line. It's a line that some people simply can't deal with crossing and as a result, the true potential of certain things is never fully realized.

There is undeniable and uncomfortable truth in acknowledging personal failure. When it relates to the creative process, that acknowledgement can only act as upward momentum.

**TG:** Some artists relish the path they take to make their art. For you, it's not about the journey, is it?

**MM:** I don't feel like I have time for the journey. I sometimes feel as if I'm on some intergalactic space mission, with a limited oxygen supply. It's a mad race to the end. I'm always trying to complete the idea as quickly as I can so I can put my flag in the ground. When the idea is completed, for a fleeting moment, I do feel a sense of calm. This calm soon turns into discomfort, and the race starts again.

**WE:** Your *Borrowed Time* Portfolio appears very different from your other work. Obviously it is in color, but it is also digital too. Did you approach it the same way you would your other projects?



All Images © Michael Massaia

*Deep In A Dream, Central Park, 4am-Toy Boat Pond, Central Park, NYC, Platinum / Palladium*

**MM:** Yes, it was approached no different than any of my other portfolios. It all starts with an idea, and then the process of thinking about how the idea will present from a graphic point of view. All the portfolios usually have to meet a certain criteria, but the most important criteria is that the subject matter is something that I earnestly connect with. Even though the portfolio was shot with a Leica S2 digital camera, the images are still all true one-shot scenes. No photoshop manipulation, compositing, etc. I needed the speed of that camera to capture the engine explosions that could never have been accomplished with my large format cameras.

*Borrowed Time* is an exploration into the moment the point of no return has been reached and the subsequent freedom that follows. Using the visual of mid-flight plane failures was my attempt to show the moment that horror, relief, freedom and graphic beauty all meet at once.

*...It was difficult to stop looking at the prints and hearing the young man speak about his work, but it was late and time to leave Gallery 270 for the evening. The artist who shared so much about his photography now looked longingly into the darkness of night. Was he thinking about his next creative endeavor before first light? They looked forward to seeing and hearing more from him, next time.*

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Tom Gramegna purchased his first Ansel Adams print at age 13 and Majored in Fine Art and Art History. As Director of Gallery 270, founded in 1998, located in suburban New Jersey, he retains a keen exuberance for photography where the artist's sweat and passion is poured out in the making of a photographic work of lasting value. See more of Michael Massaia's work at [gallery270.com](http://gallery270.com)

Wendy Erickson is a photographer, writer and teacher. As Editor, she is putting the technique back into photo technique Magazine.



Michael Massaia is a fine art Photographer and Printmaker who has spent the past few years documenting areas and objects that never extend too far from his front door. The ordinary is a common thread that runs through all his work. See more of his photographs at [michaelmassaia.com](http://michaelmassaia.com)