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## *Allen Frame: Toward a Photography of Depth*

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ALLEN FRAME is an artist whose interests and curiosity motivate him to create psychologically driven photographic narratives. His photos are images that not only contain clues about his subject's inner lives but are also reflections of his associations with these images. Similarly, the viewer is asked to free-associate with the presented imagery. His technique encourages us to question what lies beneath the surface image.

Frame was born in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1951. This Delta town is known for its literary culture and figures, including Shelby Foote and Walker Percy. He has been influenced by the writings of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Tennessee Williams. He graduated from Harvard in 1974 and moved to New York City in 1977. By the 1980s, he was immersed in the East Village arts scene working in experimental theater and photography with Nan Goldin, Gary Indiana, Cookie Mueller, Steven Buscemi, and others. He directed a play based on the writings of David Wojnarowicz' *Sounds in the Distance*. Frame lived in London for two years and wrote about the experimental theater scene there. He co-authored and co-directed, with Bertie Marshall, *Call Grandad*. In recent years, he has written a full-length play titled *Dogs Barking in the Deep South*. He has also worked in film and was the executive producer of *Four* (2012), directed by Joshua Sanchez and starring Wendell Pierce.

In the 1980s, as the AIDS plague ravaged on, Frame became involved in the Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus, along with Frank Moore, Nan Goldin, and other photographers and artists. This group helped create the now signature Red Ribbon and developed the Visual AIDS Archive and Artist Registry, where slides are collected to document and preserve the work of HIV artists. Around the same time, Frame, Goldin and Frank Franca created a slideshow that showed the work of more than 200 photographers combined with information and slogans about the scourge of AIDS globally. On December 1, 1990, the slideshow was projected onto Cooper Union's façade.

A discussion of Frame's artistic work requires an understanding of the multiple influences upon his creative imagination. He draws on so many streams of awareness to fuel his aesthetic: growing up in rural Mississippi, his love of film noir and Southern gothic writers (he includes Faulkner and Williams), his experiences as a gay Southerner moving north to attend Harvard, his arrival in New York and his immersion in the downtown arts scene of the 1980s, the horror of AIDS, and the loss of so many friends. He discusses his need to express himself in a range of media: photography, film and video, plays, and essays. He describes a desire to dive deeply into the "heart of darkness" of both the personal and societal unconscious.

Frame's photography has been compiled into three pictorial albums, with a fourth album soon to be published. These volumes include: *Detour* (2003); *Fever* (2021); *Innamorato* (2022); and the forthcoming *Whereupon*. *Detour* was inspired by a line in the Billie Holiday song "Detour Ahead" when she sings: "Can the road to love be so easy? ... There must be a detour ahead." This compendium of black-and-white photos conjures film noir tropes of alienation, repressed desires, ambiguity, and unreliable narrators and memories. The photo *Ariadna Barcelona 1997* is a good example of Frame's German Expressionistic, noir aesthetic. The work depicts a woman silhouetted in a barely lit room holding an object that may or may not be a gun. The grainy black-and-white surface effect heightens this sense of visual ambiguity. This illusion is an example of how the noir theme of "hiding in plain sight" is a major component of Frame's work. The illusory object when brought into the light is in truth a plate and not a gun. This reveals another major noir theme that Frame often explores: "nothing is as it seems."

In 2018, Frame was a recipient of the Rome Prize Fellowship in visual art. While in residence at the American Academy of Rome, he spent time wandering around flea markets searching for old photographs and negatives. In his book *Innamorato* (lover, sweetheart), there are three separate albums of photographs that contain the photos he found at the Roman flea markets in combination with his own contemporary works.

The album *Ennio* shows pictures from an Italian family album taken in the 1930s to early 1940s. Frame suggests an erotic narrative involving the two pilots in the photos. He also imagines that there is a love triangle involving the sister of one of the pilots. She is beloved by her brother's lover. Frame uses seven quotations from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* to underscore the erotic tension and passions reflected in the photos.

The second album within *Innamorato* is “Two Sisters.” In this collection of photos, Frame creates a story about the lives of two sisters. In the early photos taken in the 1950s, they are depicted as dressed in feminine attire. In the later photos, one of the sisters has rejected gender conformity. Frame offers the viewer several possibilities as to her orientation: lesbian, nonbinary, transman.

The third album is “Piero,” a collection of 1960s snapshots of an Italian young man who appears to spend all his time at the beach or in the water. Frame mingles these photos with his own color photographs of men and women enjoying themselves on land or in the water. In this album, Frame imagines all of the inhabitants of the photos as one extended family.

Frame’s albums *Fever* and the forthcoming *Whereupon* are best discussed together, as they feature the same group of artists and friends. In the 1980s, he photographed a circle of artists including Darrel Ellis, Frank Franca, Frank Moore, Nan Goldin, and many others. At the time, AIDS had not yet wreaked havoc upon an entire generation. The photos in *Fever* are in vibrant color showing subjects full of joy and possibility. Unfortunately, AIDS entered the scene. Many of those included in the album died from AIDS. At the end of the album, Frame includes interviews with eight of the artists who are still living.

The photos in *Whereupon* were exhibited at the Gitterman Gallery in New York in 2022. The work includes black-and-white photographs taken between 1977 and 1992. These pictures offer the viewer a window into a bohemian New York—grungy streets, dilapidated buildings, crash pads, and the ever-present lit cigarette. There is a sense of film noir’s shadows and light coursing through these photos.

Frame stresses his desire to re-animate the past by creating new narratives, new timelines. He looks for what’s hidden in a photograph, the unspoken story. Edward Hopper, in his journal *Notes on Painting* (1950), wrote of his desire to make “a realistic art from which fantasy can grow.” In a similar manner, Frame begins with the realistic photograph and then engages his imagination to show his viewers the infinite perceptual possibilities it contains.

He challenges us to see more deeply so that what is hidden from view, not only in the photo but in ourselves, will come into the light.