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Elena Dorfman

WANDERING IN THE UNCANNY VALLEY

JUDITH TURNER-YAMAMOTO

There's an unspoken agreement between artist and viewer that runs through Elena Dorfman's work — "leave your visual comfort zone, give yourself over to the image and I'll take you to a place unlike anywhere you've been before." It's there in her wide-ranging portrait work featuring sex dolls and their owners, in her examinations of Cosplay (costume-play) and the world of thoroughbred horse racing, and in her recent landscape series of abandoned and repurposed Midwest quarries and the Los Angeles River.

"I've always focused on the thing to the right of what's in front of me," says the Los Angeles-based photographer. "This is my natural way of perceiving the world, not engaging the obvious. The obvious is dull, it bores me. I'm looking for a challenge, an intellectual riddle to unravel. Whether it's portraiture that you first perceive as one thing, and in fact is something else, or landscapes that are very average in a way — I make something of them to take the viewer off guard. I don't linger long on the obvious. It's always an unconscious move toward what I haven't seen before. When it starts to feel forced, I have to stop and start all over again."

Dorfman's fascination with what falls beyond the right of center made itself clear as she completed her first bodies of work. While studying at Sarah Lawrence College, she focused on writing and photography, and found she liked telling stories — particularly visual stories. An independent five-year documentary book project on teen cancer provided an early platform for her storytelling prowess, and helped land her first jobs in the 1990s at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and news agencies. "I thought I wanted to be a news person. But I didn't like the haphazardness of news pho-

tography. I wanted more control over the pictures." She gravitated toward advertising and magazine work, and for 15 years, her portraiture was regularly featured in top tier publications like *The New Yorker*, *W*, *TIME* and *Marie Claire France*.

Dorfman's career evolved in a different direction in the late nineties. Her friendship with French *Marie Claire* writer Elizabeth Alexandre, who worked in the States a few times each year, led the two to collaborate. They decided to work on a story on Real Doll, a California-based manufacturer of artificial women, for *Marie Claire*.

Expensive and incredibly lifelike, these dolls emerge from a Pygmalion-like fabrication process where owners determine everything from build and facial type to nail length and polish, even the style of pubic hair. Posting on an online doll forum, saying they were interested in meeting with owners and their dolls, Dorfman and Alexandre traveled the world, interviewing and photographing respondents.

After the article, Dorfman decided to stick with the subject and see where it took her. "The project had started with curiosity — how to photograph men having sex with 125 pounds of perfectly formed, synthetic female — and rapidly turned into a serious exploration of the emotional ties that exist between men and women and their dolls." She became what she calls "a solitary witness to the lives of the dolls and the people who own them."

The photographs document intimacy — and even more revealing, quotidian events like reading the newspaper together over breakfast, watching TV or sharing a cigarette. "I came to understand there is more to a sex doll than sex," Dorfman writes in *Still*

Opposite: *Empire Falling 2*

“I’ve always focused on the thing to the right of what’s in front of me.” – Elena Dorfman

Lovers, the 2005 book published by Channel Photographics. “This exploration forced me to evaluate my own notions of love and what it means to value an object, a replacement human being, as real.”

Next, Dorfman examined the subculture of Cosplay, where participants dress in costumes and live part of their lives as characters from video games, animated films and Japanese graphic novels. She found her subjects at fan events in convention centers, college dorms, private clubs and homes across the country. As she describes it, “The theater of Cosplay has no boundaries — it’s unpredictable, open-ended. It includes the fantastic and the mundane, the sexually aberrant and the innocent, female characters who become samurai warriors and brainy scientists, and male characters who magically change their sex.” Shot against a stark black background, the strong coloration of the costumes and makeup jolts with hyper-realism, while the subjects project a singular presence and a poignant vulnerability. *Fandomania: Characters & Cosplay*, was published by Aperture in 2007 to coincide with Dorfman’s second solo exhibition at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in New York City.

“My portrait work is very straight and classical, but the subject matter isn’t,” says Dorfman. “All of my work presents a visual conundrum, asks the viewer to pause and look. My natural state is to be introspective, and my work asks for reflection on the part of the viewer. I try to wander in the ‘uncanny valley’ as much as possible, to quote an AI term. I’m drawn to the place where the unreal is almost real and you can’t quite grasp what’s real.”

In the *Pleasure Park* series, Dorfman, a former competitive horse rider who grew up in the sport, looks at the world of thoroughbred horse racing. She produced a five-minute panoramic film that both reconstructs a horse race and explores the milieu of the track, and a video looking at the power and vulnerability of jockeys. Studio portraits in the series, shot against the black backdrop with high-contrast lighting familiar from the *Fandomania* series, present these prized animals and their jockeys. The jockeys are shown naked or in riding gear; the horses wear blinkers, the masks that help keep them focused. These beings, whose physicality is shaped by their work, are presented out of context — deprived of their usual visual cues and motion. A coiled tension and sense of incompleteness run through the images.

The *Empire Falling* series is what Dorfman calls “the right turn I took to leave portraiture for a time and move into landscape.” An

architectural firm commissioned her to film rock quarry jumpers for an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. Afterwards, she began exploring secretive jumper communities whose members risk their lives leaping off hidden precipices. As they invited her into their terrain, Dorfman found herself intrigued and moved by the vast rock landscapes. For the first time, she produced a body of landscape photography, making over 25 trips to rock quarries of the Midwest, Kentucky, Ohio and southern Indiana.

“Month after month, I made those trips using Google Earth and GPS devices to find my way to the mostly abandoned quarries. We’re not talking about easy access. In some cases, I was an outright trespasser. I would climb fences, get thrown out. I was making straight digital images, drawn to the aesthetics of place, and not sure what I would do with the work.”

Over time, Dorfman devised a strategy of layering multiple photographs in order to create embellished landscapes that better captured what she saw and felt. The process began with 4x6-inch prints from each trip. “I started putting them together by hand and making visual references about what could look good together,” she recalls. “I wanted to emulate the natural process of stratum on stratum that shaped these landscapes through time.” She developed techniques to construct an individual image from as many as 300 photographs taken at multiple quarries. “I have physical cutouts of every single picture because first I had to look at them and feel them on paper.” She then layered the images digitally to create the final large-scale compositions.

“Empire Falling No. 21,” one of the most dramatic examples of her technique, is a 9.5-foot mural depicting a graffiti-laden rock face. At a single quarry, Dorfman shot over a three-day period, capturing images digitally with a medium-format camera in different lighting conditions. In the studio, she made printouts of hundreds of images, and then, cutting and pasting, hand-assembled and reconstructed the wall — rock by rock, tree by tree, every element represented by a single image. It took her two weeks to stitch the photographs together using state-of-the-art photo editing software to control visual effects, like the extensive layering in the trees and water. The result is not only a representation of a quarry but also a haunting reflection on those touched by the experience of this unique landscape.

Though Dorfman acknowledges an aesthetic debt to

Opposite: Techo, from Fandomania.



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Pleasure Park 7



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Pleasure Park 10



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Surrealism, her photographs also encompass a political dimension. “The images from *Empire Falling* present the quotidian rock landscape in an unexpected way,” she explains. “The viewers’ perception is challenged by the imagery itself, and also by their own subjective relationships to industry and the evolving earth.”

The series title, which is also the title of the 2012 book published by Damiani, refers to both the quarry that provided stone for the Empire State Building and the jumpers. But as she worked on the series, the sites offered reflection on the environment. The quarries are testaments to the power of industry to transfigure landscape. But Dorfman found this transformation is far from complete. During the years she spent photographing the ravaged landscape, she witnessed the repurposing of some of the most spectacular cuts and pits to scenic features for exclusive housing developments and golf courses. “When a quarry is re-appropriated, yet another organic landscape is destroyed.”

Dorfman’s latest body of work, *Sublime: The LA River*, grew out of her ongoing interest in reconstructed landscapes. “I wanted to continue working with a space that seemed not so interesting and imbue it with meaning — to condense time, space, seasons and events in one picture. While the quarries were innately beautiful, the Los Angeles River was simultaneously hideous and gorgeous. It was a juxtaposition of high and low, man vs. nature, a tortured and angry gash running through the city punctuated by the softest and most beautiful nature fighting to be seen. It was a conundrum, and for me, there always has to be that, something to be worked through.”

Over two years Dorfman walked the 51-mile stretch repeatedly, amassing over 22,000 pictures. Then came the challenge of conceptualizing what she was going to do next. “It was beyond overwhelming — I couldn’t make sense of where to put what.” She tried to imagine what the river was like when the city began. She studied footage from libraries, museums and archives. “I had to conceptualize the landscape, give it some form, some shape, some story.”

The project came together in early 2015 when the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art (LACMA) asked Dorfman to participate in *Artists Respond*, an invitational series where artists cre-

ate a work inspired by LACMA’s current exhibitions. Dorfman chose *Nature and the American Vision: The Hudson River School* as her point of departure, and in particular Thomas Cole’s painting “The Savage State.” As she researched the Hudson River painters, she saw connections between the Los Angeles River and the Hudson River. “Los Angeles is a violent, sprawling place that makes no sense; it’s overwhelming and visually insane. The river was concreted over and shut down in the early 20th century because it was too wild. Now the LA River is experiencing a renaissance, and there’s hope it can become a meeting point in a sprawling city. I tried to take it all apart and put it back together in a way that made sense for me.” The result is a reconstructed collage of time, place and encountered elements that tells a contemporary story.

Aspects of the Hudson River painters influenced her when she photographed — the mountains flanking the city, the spectacular skies and the clarity of light, particularly in winter. “I thought the quarry pictures were complicated — and a few of them were — but they were nothing compared to the LA River images. These were images that had to be thought through, recreated and put together. While making the pictures, I always asked myself what part of the river I wanted to represent — what’s the season, what’s the palette? A photo taken in January 2013 could be included in a picture made in March 2015 — it didn’t matter. I looked at all of the pictures, printed them, made paper cutouts of what I perceived the final image would be. Then I put them on the wall to consider. From there, I began to work with the digital files on the computer. I had a very loose structure of what I wanted before I began the digital compositions.”

The paper cutouts were the road map that allowed Dorfman to go into her vast archive and pull the digital files. Yet the chosen files didn’t always fit. “I could spend a month on a picture and it just wouldn’t work. I couldn’t get attached to any one photo. There are so many details and images in each photograph — change one thing, and the next 50 layers of the Photoshop file have to be changed. One mistake triggers another mistake, and I had to find my way around it. The work had me up at night, wondering if I was doing it right. Artists only have their instinct, and mine told me to just keep going. I would simultaneously curse each picture and long to make the next one.”

Opposite: Empire Falling 6



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Sublime 9

Opposite: Sublime 3

“Month after month, I made those trips using Google Earth and GPS devices to find my way to the mostly abandoned quarries.”

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“Sublime 9,” an image that starts at the water and ends at the mountains, was a particular challenge and took months to make. “I can literally say I made this entire picture from hundreds of objects — different cloud structures, skies, water, colors. I had to do it from the point of view of a person standing at the water’s edge and move all the way up to the top of the mountains, and shoot every single element that makes up the picture. I always strive to find the balance between believability and suspension of belief.”

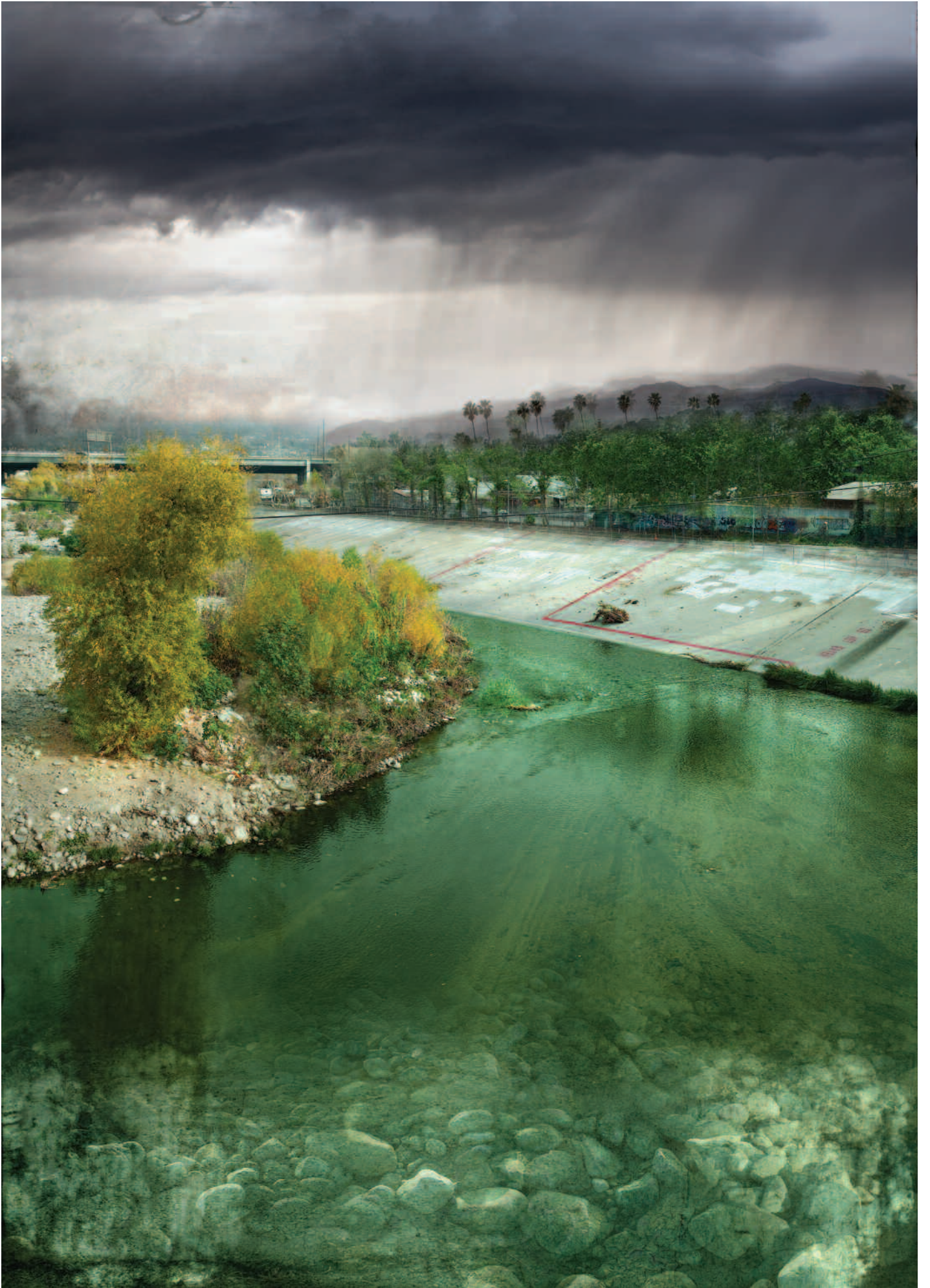
The outsized project generated outside demands and budget.

Dorfman’s computers couldn’t handle the file sizes, so she rented cinema equipment used for cutting feature films. She was constantly on the run to shoot some element that revealed itself lacking in a photograph under construction. The city’s traffic played a huge role as she roamed the river 68 times over, looking for the locations that were in her head.

With *Sublime: The LA River*, Dorfman answered a drive to make more three-dimensional, sculptural imagery — a move she believes may point to her next body of work. “I want people to walk into the photographs, to feel they are inside them. It’s the way the human eye sees — with more texture and layering than a flat, two-dimensional picture. It’s my way of making a sculpture.”

Sublime: The LA River was recently shown at Robischon Gallery, Denver and is on view through February 25 at Modernism Gallery in San Francisco. ▲

Judith Turner-Yamamoto is an art critic, curator, and fiction and features writer based in Washington, D.C. and Cincinnati, Ohio. Her articles have appeared in Elle, The Boston Globe, Finnair, The Los Angeles Times, Travel & Leisure, and Interiors.



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