

Lise Sarfati: The New Life Interview

Robert Wiedenfeld: I: Initially how did the concept develop for *The New Life* (La Vie Nouvelle)?

Lise Sarfati: I just wanted to go to the States and to work there. I loved the feeling of my body in this space felt free. I decided to do a road trip and to produce it myself. François came with me. I had no idea what I wanted to do. Just a road trip from the east to the west like in the American tradition of photography but not with the same spirit. I realized quickly the circulation of people was quite strange as in Europe we are more used to seeing people walking in the streets and appropriating themselves to the space (similar to the theory of the situationist regarding Psychogeography), or they were at home or at school or in their car, sometimes you see somebody at a gas station. Very quick the concept came to photograph young characters inside their home, in their garden and in the store next door. The concept also of a series came to me as I did not think about individual photographs. I wanted the frame of the work to stay in a very day to day life depiction of the middle class environment so that the people who looked at the photos could properly identify themselves. My questions were more geared towards how will I choose the characters? How will they have a connection between themselves and what was interesting to me really! Very quickly I decided to focus on a very challenging series with lots of ideas. The way a young person projects herself into another dimension, in another body, in another dream ... the exact movement of the projection. So we spent one week together François and I going around exploring different scenarios. Suddenly when I tried to speak with people they would not answer me. So there we were completely isolated in America while the US was at war. My perception was that people did not like so much the French people. As a result I began to say that I was from Belgium. The problem was that people did not know where Belgium was and it appeared to be an imaginary country for them. I also took an assistant along with us so that we could connect with the people faster. In order to connect with the people I would just point to him or her. So I didn't have to waste my time in explaining who we were all the time. During the whole trip I never saw my films and never knew what I was doing in order to go further I had everything in my mind because I wanted to stay in a suspended mood. I did not want to stop similar to an obsession as if I were writing a book. The fact that I never saw any of my films was very important for me. This was the first time also that I inaugurated this way of working I had absolutely no model regarding this ... This was something new for me also unknown that is why I was so excited.

RW: You have pursued youth in many countries throughout the world. What is your fascination with youth?

LS: Yes, that came from my inside feeling of being myself young even if I was not. Also it was a way for me to come back to a certain emotion that I only felt when I was young. By photographing youth I could take all my time to feel those same emotions again. I remember very well my sense of freedom as a child. However mainly I was very influenced by Witold Gombrowicz in particular his idea of perpetual (never ending) adolescence, his approach to the (human) form and by his persistence to have an adolescence like the subject of his narration. Also in Russian literature for example Dostoevsky the youth is nearly always predominant as it is in Robert Bresson films. The youth I met before in Russia when I did my series with boys were mainly young prostitutes which came from the suburbs to Moscow so they were adolescents but also they were living a real extreme experience ... This tension between their life and their body and the atmosphere of never ending destruction took me to this theme. The way I worked on young characters with *The New Life* was completely different and I could have in me the Russian experience. With *The New Life* the environment was already predetermined so I could focus more on the characters at hand.

RW: Lise one of my personal favorites from *The New Life* is Suzannah #23 Hillsboro, Or 2003. Upon first seeing this picture my memory jogged back to a very short story that I read in high school called, "The Yellow Wallpaper." For me this image is perfection she almost appears to have just got off a ghost train of sorts... Also I love the strange little apparition that mysteriously appears just above the door frame in the top right corner of the picture. I just wonder how you so effortlessly construct these images that contain somehow a real emotional vacuum... Even if you artificially manifested this mirage I still maintain that you possess the mirror of a genuine clairvoyant... Could you please deconstruct this image step by step?

LS: I met Suzannah in Portland at an art school where she was enrolled at the time. My first thought was that she was very very shy and very classical. As soon as I saw her I liked her. We did not speak too much. I was surprised she agreed to have her picture taken as I did not make such an effort to convince her. When we arrived to her house I was fascinated by the beauty of the house as I had never previously seen such a beautifully crafted house during our whole trip while traveling for *The New Life*. Everything was handmade from wood, there was a beautiful crafted staircase between the two floors. The living room was very rich in colours and very old fashioned. I remember the windows in the living room were traditional beveled leaded glass windows typical of the craftsman type homes in Oregon. Her mother was sewing dresses, old

fashion dresses with very interesting cloth and I resisted to look at her work instead choosing to stay distant and focused on Suzannah. Suzannah was wearing this unusual yellowish mustard colored dress that presumably her mother made for her. I photographed her in every room not asking so much, especially in the bedrooms. I remember that she blushed became red during the shooting. For this particular shot we were in the kitchen where she naturally touched the glass of water. This was her natural instinct. Nothing was arranged you can see all this plastic and paper behind her that I did not touch. I did like that the plan was so large and so horizontal also I thought it was a nice touch that the arrière-plan was behind her. This picture was made during the day and I remember the way she put her hand on the pleats of her dress... She was very quiet and her hair was obscuring her face.

RW: There is a real sense of continuity projected in all of your work whether the pictures were taken in Russia, China, France, or USA. Can you please speak about cohesiveness and the importance of authorship regarding your own personal work?

LS: I make all the works I do belonging to my own identity instead of being an observation of the world. My own experience drives me and I realize that my experiences of life were perceived more through the eyes of my youth rather than adulthood. I am interested in all sorts of projections. Also I will never do a mise en scene which will go only from my imagination or my mind I will use the potential of the personage to give me a lot of possibilities and I will take a lot from either he or she. My specificity will be to choose the good personage as Robert Bresson did in his movies, not professional actors, never models but encounters that have never been photographed before. When I was living in Russia much of my work was based on a mise en abîme of natural landscapes and stills mixed in a poetic way with my personages. The main difference being that when I worked in the States I was primarily focused on personages.

RW: In the *New Life* series you refer to the girls as characters and the person in charge of the wardrobe as a costumer... Can you explain the roles of both?

LS: When I did *The New Life* the girls and boys I met were my personages that is true but I did not have anybody managing their outfits with me. I could not think of changing anything in their clothes as their outfits represent a certain richness for me. I met a lot of girls who were very frustrated and they could only express themselves through the clothes they wear or through a color or a way to put their hair. I never asked them to change their clothes. The Austin, Texas series was something else as it was a commission of fashion work with a costumiere from Paris. I said to Leila think you are a costumiere and not a stylist it will help us to get where we need to be in terms of style.

RW: The use of analogous colors in your work is very distinct and as a result plays a very important role in all of your pictures. Could you describe the relationships between colours in your work?

LS: I work a lot on colors. When I began photography I was the photographer for the Academie des Beaux-Arts in Paris where I was doing reproductions of paintings. I spent a lot of time photographing with a view camera Monet, Dali amongst other academicians for the entire catalogue of the Académie... I had a palette of colors for mixing and matching in order to find the right color... When I am doing my prints my printer goes crazy as I could feel a point of a red or yellow or magenta... I am very sensible about color perhaps because I spent all of my childhood in Nice in the south of France near the sun with a lots of white and blue. Then I went for the first time to Russia I was only 15 and visited the border of The Black Sea. I discovered the grey and I was fascinated by this world of no colour a very sad world... When I came to America the color was everywhere and it gave me happiness I embraced this. I feel color like I breathe colour is my element.

RW: Which painters either modern or classical do you look towards for inspiration?

LS: I love the Russian artists from the 1920's for example Alexei Kruchenykh, Kazimir Malévich, Natalia Goncharova I love a lot abstraction, mainly Russian Suprematism but also I care for drawings. My masters for a long time have been Hans Bellmer and Unica Zurn for her drawings. I also like Fra Angelico and Giotto and a lot of other different painters so the list would be really long

RW: Your pictures reflect a certain cinematic aura. I feel at times when looking as though I'm in the middle of a great movie while wondering what will happen next. Is part of what your trying to project similar to the approach of the mise-en-scène used by cinematographers?

LS: That is right. What will happen next is a good introduction to my photography. I would like the viewer to actively participate in the image. Of course I would be happy if the viewer could identify herself in the image also and do not look at it like a spectacle... I think the feeling comes from the series rather than an individual image. I have been educated by Robert Bresson who elaborated the theory of the models instead

of the actors. He said that the actors were doing theater and that we need real people, real emotions and he asks that the personage will find themselves in the real life repeating a text about 10 times in order to let the real emotion keep going... (that is what I feel too). The difference is that Bresson uses text while I don't! The Text is in my brain (...) and I just project myself towards the personage that I meet and it works all the time we just connect... Sometimes some are dominating me sometimes I influence them but all the time something is happening and they will never forget that we met one day...

RW: Did you ever encounter a certain level of ethnocentric behavior exhibited by those subjects that you portray in *The New Life Series*?

LS: Yes in a way if ethnocentrism means to be an observer of my cultural group. I try to focus on an observation of personages that mirror my own world or upbringing. These are mainly middle class from metropolitan cities. Additionally my work is not too much social. The girls and the boys of *The New Life* are those I am drawn to naturally however some are from very poor families while others maintain a middle class background. For example Terri was living in a trailer with her mother in Portland, Oregon. Madeleine was from a richer family from Berkeley and Gaelyn was living in New Orleans in a wooden house with only her mother who was a nurse and with her older sister... I found a lot of common denominators between all the personages and I felt that they were living the same life more or less and shared the same emotions. Their limits were based on their environments and on their circulation from their private homes to their school. Often the girls and boys that I have photographed were living in houses with their parents. They were mainly adolescents however what attracted me to them is that they all suffered a lot as well as sharing a certain propensity towards insecurity. The question for them is often Who am I? Where am I coming from? What do I want? Exactly like the personages of Anton Tchekov in the 3 sisters. This is also why I decided to call my series *The New Life* as the notion came from *Vita Nova* by Dante.

RW: You seem to have a predisposition a knack for always choosing the right subjects while harmoniously weaving them into their own respective environments ... In *The New Life* you appear to be inventing your own americana picture by picture... industrial malaise, urban vortexes, suburban sprawl, etc... How much of your process relies on serendipity?

LS: I think that I feel comfortable choosing the people I am working with. I feel them I feel that they have a little aura which creates a potential of freedom and a possibility to do a photograph. More so what I like best is the creative moment when I found somebody in a relationship with somebody else I met before in another city in another state... That way for all time they will have something in common difficult to analyse like a magic circle that you cannot go through. I love to find my own signs inside the environment and to create my own universe which is becoming most important for me more and more as the world seems to me quite the same everywhere. I remember arriving in the states I chose what were the most significant themes for me at once and then step by step I discovered the small details. I enjoyed the environments as much as the personages. My love is equal for the both... Before I was photographing separately the two, one time a thing or a landscape and one time a personage then I associated the two which was the case in my russian work especially demonstrated in my show in Salamanca, Spain and also the catalogue. Beginning with *The New Life* I felt good combining the two together and I felt that my photography was much more complex also adding a certain richness at the same time. In that way I could associate signs to personage in the same image while simultaneously being precise also the idea of the personage and the importance of the context...

RW: Could you describe the process of how you went about assimilating the sequence for *The New Life* book ?

LS: When I came back I never saw my photographs everything was shot with slides and I was really excited to discover the work entirely all at once. Initially I was of course scared to look as I knew that everything must be done with the edit. I wondered just how I would go about constructing the sequence. My time spent on editing and re-editing was very minimal. The decision came to me to introduce personages which gave a disequilibrium to the series like Fenya... Finally when I showed my work afterwards in galleries the collectors were focused mainly on very specific images which was not the same way I was looking at the work.

RW: Please describe the delicate balance between background and foreground in all of your pictures... What is your mental process or rather the internal dialogue that you have with yourself before pressing the shutter?

LS: I am fascinated by the combination of the surrounding and the personage. I acquired this skill when I was in Russia while I was doing strictly documentary photography. Then I worked on myself trying to understand what was the personage what was the surrounding or the landscape and my specificity came

from this balance. I recognize for myself the language regarding the relationship of which the subject has to the world .

RW: You shared that one of your main influences is the brilliant filmmaker Robert Bresson for various reasons. Bresson has stated that the number one rule to art is unity. He has also freely admitted to shooting the same scene again and again apparently looking for various nuances in the performance of the actors i suspect. How does this technique specifically reshoots differ from how you worked on *The New Life*? Typically how many rolls of film will you expose to feel confident that you have what you set out to get?

LS: Bresson was totally against actors and never used professional actors. He used only real people that he found in various places. One of his ways to realize his films was to choose a text like a novel of Dostoievskiy, adapt it to the reality of contemporary France and then ask the personnage (he calls him the model) to read the text but not to play it. For *The New Life* I did not shoot many rolls on each character around 3. I was concerned that my subjects would become tired of me quickly. In retrospect when I think about it I did not use much film. We just made appointments for the shoots everything was quite natural although I was mostly silent which must have been somewhat disturbing for the subject I guess. I already had the layout in my mind before I began the shoot. When I shoot I just take the pictures to have confirmation of what I already anticipated however sometimes of course this approach does not work. The personnage I expected verses the one I ended up with is often very different from girl to girl... The problem is that my way of working has so many limits on which I am depending on where so much of the emphasis relies on the emotion of the person I photograph.

RW: Cinema has always been a close relative of photographie... In theory if you were given a budget free of constraints and were able to work under your own circumstances which kind of film would you make?

LS: Perhaps a black and white film becoming a color one something about the movement of the personages in the city... I would need to think about something close to my photographic works ... I will write a scenario possibly taking place in a eastern country mixed to another one...

RW: You have a multitude of ideas regarding the female identity words such as internalizing, projections, intangible concepts, duality, and transversal themes. In your own words what defines femininity for you?

LS: For me femininity is to approach themes where women are shown in their relationship to the world, between themselves and in the way they struggle for their life in the society. I am interested by the body and the psyché of the woman I am also interested in maternity and in the relationship of the woman as a species. In *The New Life* series the life of the adolescent typically expresses a certain boredom to the exterior world. In extreme cases this effect can climax into a big melodrama similar to the *Columbine* tragedy.

RW: You have stated that films can be more interesting although according to you the still image is more terrifying... What do you mean precisely?

LS: For the moment I am more interested in fixed images as it is easier to realize than films which require lots of money... I spend so much time to finalize a project between the time I finish my series and the time I am publishing a book and doing my show.

For *The New Life* everything went very quick the series was done in 2003 The Book published in 2005 and my first show was in London before the publication of the book. Finally I did a lot of shows with the series and I was very happy with the outcome as the public reaction was wonderful with lots of positive feedback from the shows.

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