



ARTS+CULTURE
NORTH TEXAS



LIFE IN BLACK & WHITE

Texas photographer approaches art with cinematographer's eye

Fine art photographer Jay Rusovich is fiercely — and refreshingly — old school. He shoots only black and white film and adamantly refuses to use Adobe Photoshop on any of his images. His camera of choice is an RZ67 Pro II Mamiya: a “big, heavy, cumbersome [thing that’s] almost impossible to hand hold,” but is also well suited to the slow and precise way Rusovich works.

His photographic career emerged as an offshoot of post-collegiate aspirations to become an actor in the early 1980s. The Louisiana native discovered photography while living in New York and working as a bit player in commercials, soap operas and movies. A quick study, Rusovich soon became a much-in-de-

mand commercial portrait photographer. But he never forgot his early experiences in the motion picture industry.

“From the time I started [shooting, I felt] that I was really more of a film director because of the amount of time I spent with the people I was photographing,” he says.

Rusovich, who now resides in Houston, made the switch to art photography in 2005. Like his commercial portraits, his artistic ones are all carefully staged. Reveling in the role of artificer, he determines in advance what elements will appear in his images, eschewing anything that smacks of the photojournalistic. “I have a lot of respect for people who go and photograph wars and what-

ever,” remarks Rusovich. “I think that’s great documentation, but it’s not their work: it’s life’s work. I’ve never believed that there was any art in witnessing anything.”

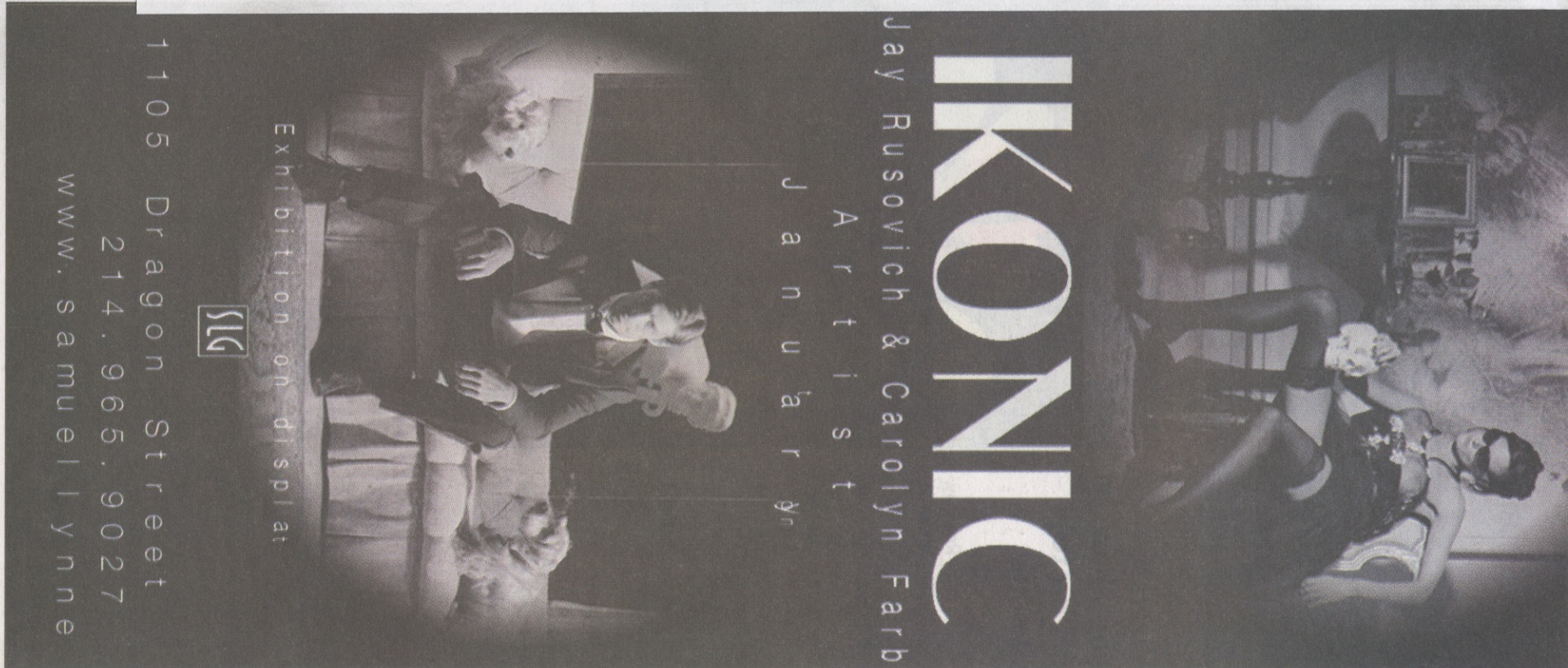
At once playfully transgressive and mordantly ironic, Rusovich’s oeuvre is nothing if not visually compelling. But his cinematic approach to portraiture has also made his work controversial to curators of fine art photography.

“The Metropolitan Museum in New York has fought with me over this,” he says. “The great art, they say, is through-the-lens photography: I say it’s exactly the opposite. Somebody’s got to create those images.”

For all the control Rusovich exercises over such elements as theme and setting design, however, he never poses any of his models. Instead, he gives them free reign to “act out” the ideas he wishes to communicate visually.

“I can’t remember the last time I posed anybody,” says Rusovich. “[What I do is have] a conversation with people while we are shooting. When I feel the subject understands where I’m going, then I let them go.”

Achieving the desired effect is never easy. It requires that he help his subjects—whom he often calls his “cast members”—do what all good actors must: bring their own emotional expe-



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periences to bear on the “roles” they play in the photographs.

“Unless we have an emotional connection, the magic doesn’t happen,” he explains. “It would be the same thing if an actor [went] to an audition with a casting director and [didn’t] get the point: [if they can’t], they can never fully communicate the message.”

Rusovich’s images suggest a fascination with the physicality and muscularity of his subjects. But beautiful bodies are only vehicles for his real intent, which is to explore human psychology and offer glimpses into the inner lives of the people he shoots.

“I don’t do anything just for effect,” he says. “I couldn’t care less whether a photograph is beautiful [aesthetically]. I care whether it’s beautiful emotionally. I want people to come away with some message, and if they don’t, then I have failed.”

A dynamic tension between reality and fantasy—especially sexual fantasy that verges on the violent—is ever-present in Rusovich’s work. That tension is heightened by the photographer’s conscious insistence on creating a three-dimensional visual experience in two dimensions wherever possible. Both are crucial to the photographer’s truth-telling aims and desire to get viewers to give voice to unspo-

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ken interior truths, no matter how dark or otherwise unpalatable.

Says Rusovich, “Everything is so fleeting and transient and surreal: we’ve gotten so far away from reality it’s ridiculous. [H]alf the nation is in psychotherapy [trying] to figure out who they are as people. Let’s [try having] real conversations and real connections instead.”

An exhibition of Rusovich’s work will begin December 15 at the Samuel Lynne Galleries in Dallas. More Information at www.samuellynne.com.

— M. M. ADJARIAN



Jay Rusovich, “Fragile Expectations,” 2010. All images courtesy of the artist, and Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston.