

MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

SEP 18

Interview: Bill Armstrong

INTERVIEW



Portrait #302

Fascinated by the profound effect that color can have on perception and emotions, Bill Armstrong produces lush, semi-abstract, semi-figurative photographs. In his series, he makes his photographs by taking intentionally blurred photographs to invoke the sporadic, and often temporal feelings of the moment.

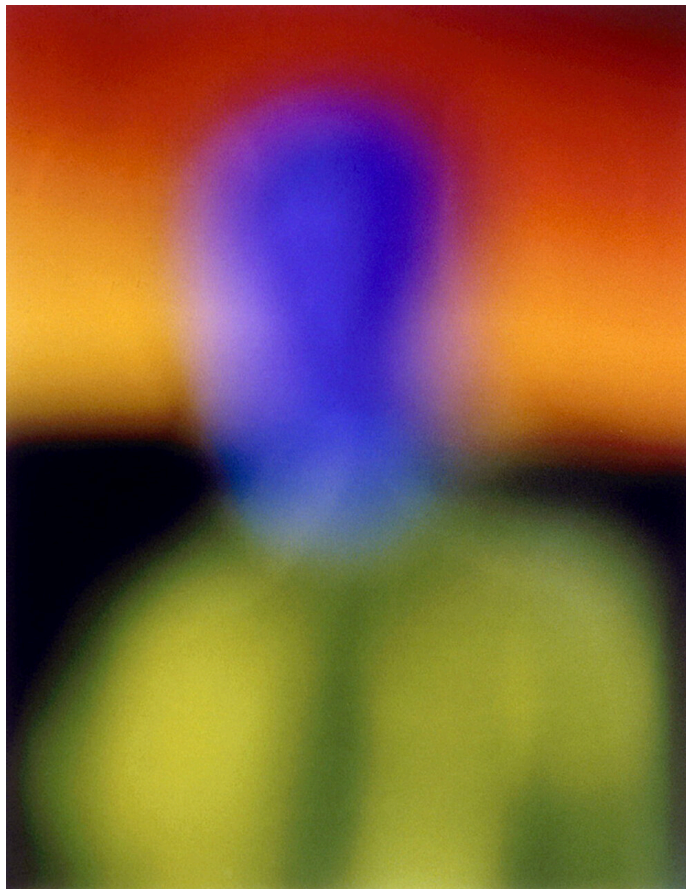
Interview by [Kala Herh](#)

1) KALA HERH First of all, I want to congratulate you on showing at HackelBury Fine Art Gallery in London last month. I had some friends who saw Figure #65 and they couldn't stop raving about it. It was quite the standout. So I'm curious as are others, but what initially drew you to this concept of blurred focus.

BILL ARMSTRONG Thank you for the compliment about my image at Hackelbury and thank you for inviting me to be in your beautiful magazine. In the mid-nineties, I was working on a project called *Accidental Portraits* re-photographing advertising posters found in the street. I was intrigued by Uta Barth's out of focus show at MOMA, so I tried blurring one of the posters. It looked great and I was off—and soon off the street, into the studio with a pile of magazines, a pair of scissors and all my rules about “straight” photography thrown out.

2) HERH Let's go all the way back. I read that you grew up in Concord, Massachusetts how was that? Do you think this influenced who you are as an artist?

ARMSTRONG Oh, definitely. Concord was the birthplace of the American Transcendentalist movement so perhaps its not surprising that there is a transcendental quality to my work. It was also the site of the first battle of the Revolutionary war, so maybe a rebellious spirit is behind my challenging the rules of photography—I mean photographs are supposed to be sharp, right?



Portrait #308

3) HERH Yeah for sure. So what was the idea behind your *Portrait* series?

In *Portraits*, one of the early portfolios in my *Infinity* series, I wanted to make something dark, powerful and edgy after the dreamy *Landscape* series I had been working on at the time. But I had to ask myself, how could something blurred be edgy? The solution came with experimental color combinations within the form of the traditional bust, combined with the mysterious and perhaps disturbing idea of a blank portrait without features. The images rely on color, shape and posture to show a range of human emotions, yet, because they lack the features or expressions of an individual, they remain open to reflect whatever the viewer may bring to them.



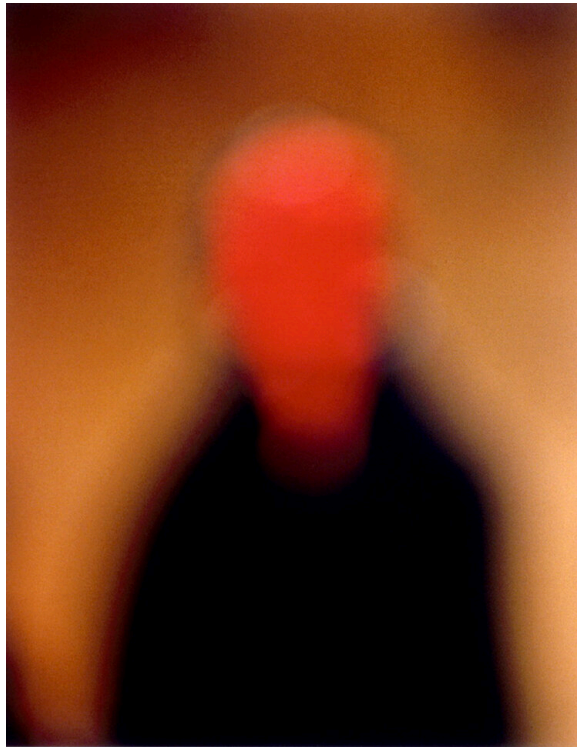
Portrait #313

4) HERH Do you feel like the images you produce illustrate more personal or universal themes?

ARMSTRONG Both. I try to connect with my personal feelings and experiences. But I hope the images have a sense of the universal or familiar that people can identify with. I think the fact the features are blurred or unseen, makes it possible for viewers to put themselves into the pictures—that the portraits can become mirrors.

5) HERH In that essence, do you have certain colors that evoke certain feelings for you?

ARMSTRONG You know, I teach color theory so I have some technical background in color meaning and psychology, but color responses are subjective and depend on many different things. For myself, I find that often I work within a certain palette for a shoot, and if I leave the work out, when I come back the next day, those colors may not interest me at all. So there is a gestural aspect to how I work, trying to let the feelings of the moment express themselves in some way. It reminds me of a famous story about how a collector came to Rothko's studio one day and asked to see some of his happy, yellow and red paintings, and he said something like, "Happy? Those are the colors of the Inferno."



Portrait #315

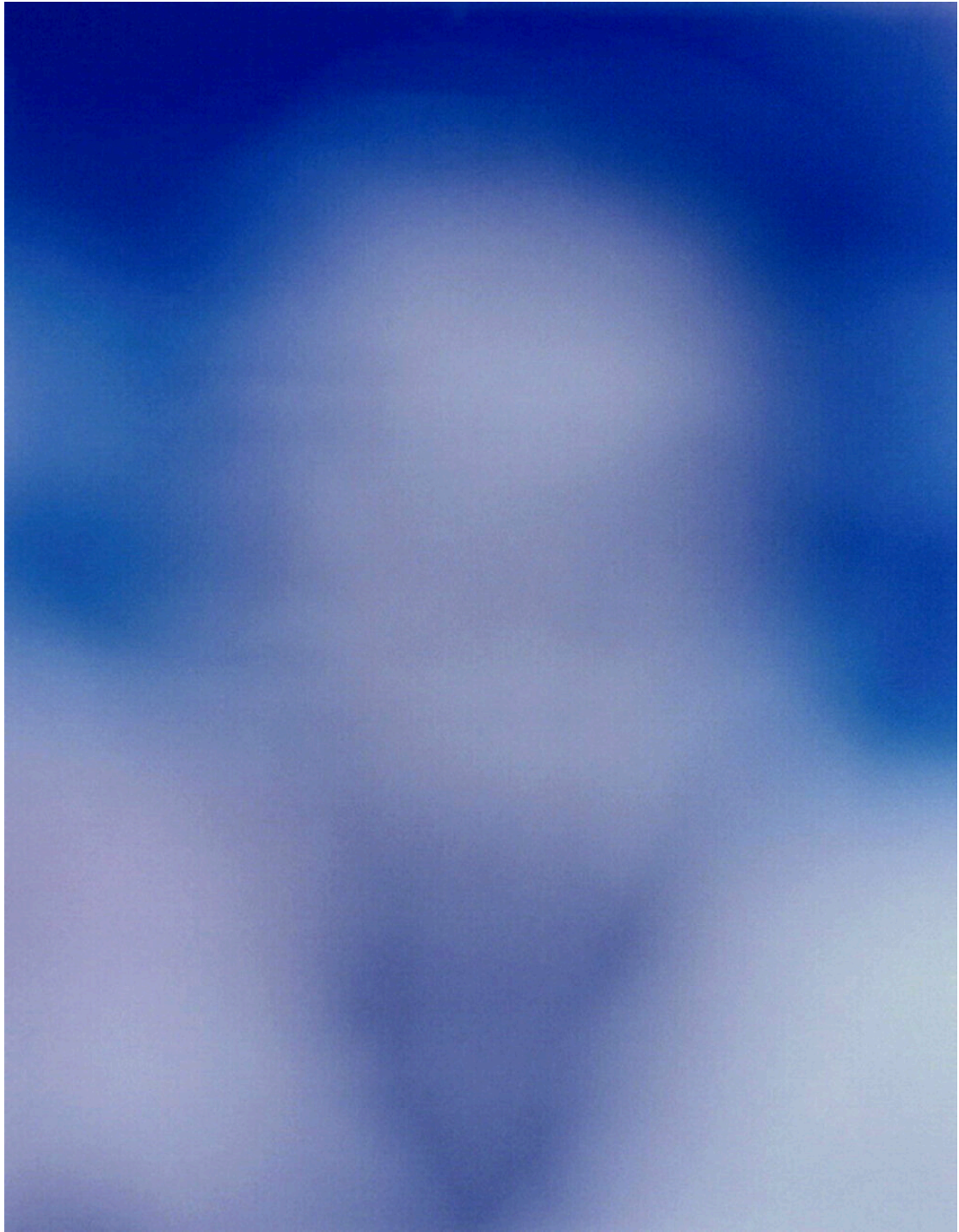
6) HERH You said that your last three series were a departure as they were shot on digital rather than film. Why did you make the transition to digital?

ARMSTRONG Well, I stayed with film for technical reasons because the analog process works best for printing blurred images. I found that ink jet prints of my work suffered from banding and posterization. But I knew that the ability to make chemical prints was going to end. So for the last five or six years I have been experimenting with all kinds of ideas. Fortunately about three years ago, I finally came up with some ways of working digitally that I liked. Using long exposures and camera movement is a new process for me, as well as using diffusion filters on a light table combined with digital layering. Both have enabled me to use simple tools to make images that function beyond the norms of the real—images of imagination not documentation—that have a sense of boundlessness, and seem to fit in with the trajectory of my work. Just in time, too, the International Center of Photography color darkroom, where I have made all my prints for the last 25 years, closed last spring.

7) HERH With this generation's interest in more abstract pieces that focus on meditation. Do you think there is a new trend for blurred images?

ARMSTRONG I am not sure. Blur has been around since the beginning of photography. When I was working in the late 90s, it felt like I was in a school of blurred photographers in New York: David Armstrong, Bill Jacobson, Robert Stivers and others. Trends are cyclical. If blur is back, I hope a new generation can find new ways to use it. I'd like to see that.

8) HERH And one last question before you go, what themes are you excited to explore in the future? ARMSTRONG, I'm always exploring and trying new ideas, which is exhilarating, but this fall I'll be working on getting my latest series, *Falling Through History*, out in the world. I think it's some of my best work yet, and I would love to see it in a museum—it's so much about the history of art and the works held in museums.



Portrait #319