

**Running Deeper:  
The Photographs of Connie Imboden**

**by A. D. Coleman**

A dialectician in a metaphysical age, the Greek philosopher Democritus (ca. 460-370 BCE) warned us that one can't step in the same river twice.

Which perhaps explains why Connie Imboden can return again and again to the nominally same subject — the unclothed human figure reflected in mirrors and/or submerged in water — and find therein an ever-replenished source of profound, unsettling imagery. She has discovered and explored an idea and a way of working that seem exceedingly restrictive when described in words, but whose true depths one senses she has only begun to plumb.

Artists have delimited their horizons in various ways, of course, often tuning in to a very narrow bandwidth isolated from the range of available frequencies; think of the painter Giorgio Morandi devoted exclusively to his studio still lifes, Josef Albers obsessed with his squares. Edward Steichen famously made a thousand images of eggs, as an exercise in understanding light. W. Eugene Smith, William Gedney, André Kertész and others have photographed repeatedly from the same window, or returned to the same spot again and again to see it anew. So photographers are no strangers to the idea of limitations, and have in some cases even courted them, as challenges.

Nonetheless, if a photographer were to tell you that she intended to spend decades photographing people naked on a few specific square yards of earth, and meant to print the results on a particular kind of photographic paper in a specific size, you might well ask if she could be putting herself on too short a leash. And your doubts probably wouldn't be much alleviated if she told you she'd use a few cubic yards of water instead of dirt.

So perhaps it's fortunate that her project to date has sprung from and followed no careful, articulated plan, but instead has evolved organically, from

processes of thought and emotion, from intuition and frustration, from inspiration and the operations of chance. That has served to keep this work open-ended and vital, devoid of the formulaic, consistently edgy and anxious, charged with a psychic energy that any precise schema would surely have stifled by now.

Though Imboden is a gifted and interpretative photographic printmaker, these images, technically speaking, are traditional "straight" photographic prints — not collages, darkroom-generated photomontages, in-camera multiple exposures, or digitally altered images, but accounts of visual events that actually took place before the lens. As the photographer herself says, "They are all seen through the camera working with the reflections and distortions in water and mirrors."

This holds true not only for her black & white work, which comprises the first quarter-century of her output, but also the more recent color images, produced with a digital camera and rendered in the form of digital prints but not subjected to any manipulation in the computer. Which suggests that, in the case of a picture-maker like Connie Imboden, truly attuned to the voices of her own angels and demons, the presumed limits of so-called "straight" photography may not be anywhere near as confining as many think.

It's also important to highlight the fact that her chosen vehicle for printmaking, until late 2007, was gelatin-silver photographic paper. Photography, like music, is a tonal art form, and silver has resonance for us on several levels. Symbolically, it's a semi-precious metal from which we make, among other things, sacred objects and musical instruments, chalices and flutes; we value its luminosity, its resonance, and its clarity of tone. Its reflective capacity allows us to use it for making glass into mirrors.

The fact that silver tarnishes upon exposure to air is, as it happens, the very premise of photography. And that tarnish, controlled by a skilled photographer at every step along the way — exposure and development of the negative, exposure and development of the print — can produce the deepest illusion of three-dimensionality and darkness of which any material available to the photographer is capable. That those processes involve slowly, attentively

rocking the latent images into visibility in liquid baths, in absolute darkness first and then in low-light situations, echoes and amplifies Imboden's imagery in ways that seem altogether appropriate. There is thus an inner logic, a consonance, between the literal subject Imboden addresses, the issues she uses that subject matter to explore, and the materials she employs to resolve those investigations into the final content of her work.

Silver also produces, uniquely, a range of overtones that can be heard as well as seen. None of the other light-sensitive metals — neither iron (used in cyanotypes) nor the far more expensive platinum and/or palladium — rings with its clear, sonorous chime and multiple harmonics. One can not only look at but listen to photographic images made within the tradition out of which Imboden comes: the prints of Edward Weston, Wynn Bullock, Imogen Cunningham, Barbara Morgan, Minor White, Paul Caponigro, Richard Kirstel, Carl Chiarenza, for example.

As Ansel Adams famously proposed with a musical analogy, in the hands of a photographer who utilizes the interpretative potentials of the printmaking process in photography "the negative is the score, the print is the performance." This holds true for her sumptuous prints of the new color work, which render perfectly the subtleties of the muted palette she achieves. She brings to the technology of digital image-making and printing the same understandings, the same eye (and ear) for nuance, that she developed while investigating the analog form of the medium. The results prove no less musical. So open your ears as well as your eyes to these songs of Imboden's. For songs they are: songs of the spirit, songs of the flesh.

Though not without its passages of tranquility and flashes of humor, this is on the whole a somber and often fearsome cumulative statement, a journey into the underworld of the psyche, its unfathomable visual darkneses emblematic of the unconscious — both individual and collective — it seeks to probe, expose, and describe. Yet other of her works emanate an ecstatic beauty; and all of them, whether joyous or horrific, ravish the sensorium.

In the trajectory of this work to date, progressively more troubled waters

are faced and calmed. The ever more nightmarish finds itself eventually neutralized, transmuted into a broadened, provocative definition of the stuff that dreams are made of, an enlarged set of options as to how we can envision ourselves. This adventure of Imboden's has possibilities that are far from exhausted. Clearly, these still waters run not only deep but ever deeper, and Imboden remains submerged in them. What she seeks, I'd guess, is the ability to take comfort in and even relish the unfamiliar, what Alan Watts called "the wisdom of insecurity." How else to survive in a world without constants? Keep in mind that there's not the slightest note of fear in Democritus's adage about the ever-changing river; it's no dire warning, but instead a legend for the banners of the intrepid explorers among us.

According to one source, Democritus "held that perception is an unreliable source of knowledge and knowledge can be obtained through reason only." Right about so many things, Democritus was, in my opinion, wrong (at least in part) on that very last issue. Perception, like intuition, may be unreliable, but that doesn't eliminate it as a path to knowledge; it merely posts signs cautioning us to watch our step along the way. These images of Connie Imboden's exemplify the insight we may attain as we wade into the depths, fill our lungs, submerge, and commit ourselves to getting in over our heads while keeping our eyes open wide.

[This is the complete text of a curatorial essay for the exhibition *Light Quartet: Themes & Variations* — Kate Breakey, Connie Imboden, Jerry Spagnoli, Robert Stivers, published in the catalogue for that show by See+ Art Space/Gallery, Beijing, China, 2009, pp. 57-59. It appears here in conjunction with an online version of that exhibition published by the [VASA Project](#), January 2011.]