

CHARIOTS OF DESIRE

LensWork Interview • January, 2006



"1936 Delahaye, 2001"

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interview with Huntington Witherill

Chariots of Desire • Interview

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"1941 Ford Model A Custom Rod, 2005"

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The following interview – reproduced herein in a condensed form – first appeared in LensWork magazine, Jan, 2006 (#62). The complete interview, together with an extensive portfolio of images, audio sound bytes and additional content not found in the original printed version of LensWork #62, can be purchased as an interactive CD-ROM entitled: "LensWork Extended #62." Click the following text link to visit the LensWork web site at www.lenswork.com

Brooks Jensen: The last time you and I sat down and talked, believe it or not, was back in July 1999 when we were interviewing you for *LensWork* #26 prior to publishing your black and white botanical images. You've obviously been a very busy photographer since then. You have several new bodies of work of which this is just one ...

Huntington Witherill: I guess that's true. Time flies! One of the things I've always been anxious to do with my photography is to

branch out. I tend to get bored with what I'm doing so I change my approach as often as I can gain inspiration to do so. This particular series started in 1989, so it's one that I've been working on for a long period of time.

BJ: A photographer that comes to mind as you talk is Paul Strand. He tended to do a little bit of what you do. He worked in discrete projects which eventually, in his case, always ended up being a book. You also work in well-defined projects. They interweave a bit and inform each other. I can see in these car photographs some of the elements that are in the new color botanical work I see on your website. There are at least some compositional similarities, but yet they're very distinct bodies of work that are each self-contained... your photographic career, as it were, is one rope with many threads.

HW: I hope there is a thread that runs through all of the work regardless of the approach. This is where one's photographic personality is defined. I have a certain way that I approach photography and I think that comes through – at least I hope it does – regardless of the subject I am photographing. It's my personality in the photographs. When I was first starting out, I would show my work to some curator or critic and they would say, "So-and-so has done this before. You need to do your own work." We've all heard this criticism. But, I've always believed that one cannot remove their personality from their photographs. It's impossible to do so. And, the more work you do, obviously the more similarity you will find throughout the work in terms of its personality.

BJ: I'd agree, but I do see that you're unique in this regard: When I look at all the various works of Paul Strand, for example, they're all definable as Paul Strand images even though they're from different projects. They're so similar visually – from a construction point of view, from a palette point of view. Yours are not. Yes, there's an

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element that's similar, but, when I look at the palette that you're using on these images of cars, it's a completely different palette than I'm familiar with from your landscape work. And that is a different palette from your black-and-white botanicals, which is yet again a completely different palette than the one you're now using in your recent color work. In terms of personality, you seem to have a wide range.

HW: (chuckling) It wouldn't be the first time I was accused of having a scattered personality.

BJ: Now I didn't say that!

HW: No. But it's complimentary and I appreciate it! I've gotten a lot of inspiration from music throughout my career as a photographer. Prior to becoming a photographer, I was a musician. One of those inspirations has been the Beatles. They produced a lot of albums and every one had a completely different personality.

BJ: That's true.

HW: That inspired me to try to reinvent myself – if that's the correct term – from time to time with my photography. In the long-run it's just an effort to keep myself from becoming bored with what I'm doing.

BJ: Well, I wonder if some of it is also the fact that your approach to different subject matter is a response to the subject matter – photographing the subject matter as it wants or needs to be photographed.

HW: I think that's true. I would take it even further to say that I also try to respond to the light in terms of what it's really trying to show, in and of itself. I try to use the light to its best advantage, so it's not just the subject matter.



"Bugatti Boatail #3, 2001

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BJ: With respect to your technical approach, are you making the original exposures on film?

HW: I was when I started in 1989. I began the project using a Pentax 6x7 film camera. I then used a Rollei SL66 and did a number of images using that camera. I've also used a Mamiya 7 and the last two years I've worked strictly with two digital cameras – a Canon 20D and a Canon 5D. It's been a progression.

BJ: And the finished artwork is digital prints?

HW: Yes... Originally I did print some of these as conventional

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enlargements, but once I got involved with digital I converted those images to digital output and greatly refined them. I've taken out a lot of distracting elements.

BJ: I wondered about that. Anybody whose ever pointed their camera at a vehicle like this or anything that's this highly reflective immediately realizes the problem of doing unintentional self-portraits.

HW: That's right.

BJ: I've looked at all of these and, unless I'm missing something, I haven't seen you in a single picture yet!



"Lamborghini Diablo SV, 2005"

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HW: Well, I'm in there... at least in a few of them. One of the most ubiquitously distracting elements in all of the compositions is the photographer himself. Photoshop has made dealing with that much easier. I also photograph at angles that serve to keep me out of the photographs. Of course, at an event like the Concours d'Élégance I also have to deal with the reflections of other people in the photographs. These things have to be very carefully managed. One of the reasons why a lot of these photographs were taken pre-dawn is simply that each successive year the crowds have been larger and larger. When I first started going out there in 1989, there may have been a thousand people milling around looking at the vehicles when I started photographing around 8:00am. This past year, I started pre-dawn, and by 7:30 in the morning there seemed to be 10,000 people milling around the vehicles. There was barely enough space to work. I would often wait 10 to 15 minutes for people to move out of the reflections.

BJ: Sounds like you've got a lot of Photoshop work to do.

HW: I'm able to do a certain amount of Photoshop work, but Photoshop has its limits. If you're trying to remove a large area of distraction that's located within a smooth tonal gradient like the hood of a car, by cloning or some other means, you're definitely behind the eight ball. It's almost impossible to do.

BJ: Yeah, that's tough. Have you photographed at other events? Are you a car collector yourself or are you approaching these strictly as an admirer from the photographic perspective?

HW: My appreciation of them is strictly from the photographic perspective. I know very little about cars. I love classic automobiles. I love the form and line, the visual details of those cars. I do like the mechanical aspects of them, as well. But, I have very little knowledge of the cars themselves, particularly in regard to the provenance of each

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vehicle's history, which serious collectors know very well. They'll even know who has previously owned each vehicle. I strictly look at them as form, line and space.

BJ: In some of the background material that you sent us you mention that Brett Weston was an important influence and that his approach to abstracts has rubbed-off on you.

HW: It did. I'd seen a couple of photographs that he'd made in 1987 of a new Porsche he'd just purchased – abstract details of the form and line of the vehicle. Brett was a car fanatic. He loved automobiles. Every time I visited with him it seemed like he had a new “ride” of some sort or another. When I looked at the photographs he'd done of his Porsche I realized that within this picture of details of an automobile there was every bit of the drama and impact of the most grand of the grand landscape photographs. I started thinking that the best aspects of photography – the impact, the aesthetic presence, the glorious nature of so many photographs – has more to do with the light and form than it does with the subject matter. And as far as I'm concerned, Brett was *the* master of abstract photography. He could take photographs of very mundane details and turn them into these glorious, interesting, aesthetic expressions. It had nothing to do with what the subject matter was; it was the light, the form, and the way he organized those elements into the two-dimensional frame. In retrospect, it was a defining moment for me to see those photographs. It was a turning point for me as a photographer.

BJ: Do you think this is where your “style” derives from?

HW: It's where the cohesiveness in all of the work that I do comes from. I do tend to look at the world in terms of form and line and space. I often remain figuratively oblivious to the subject I'm looking at and pay more attention to the form and light. I think Brett looked at the world in much the same way. Certainly he had his grand landscapes as

well, but he was best-known for his abstract details. I'm not sure I can describe it, but there is a kind of micro and macrocosm ... you know, if you take the smallest piece of the world it can look just like the whole world itself.

BJ: Do you think any of this has anything to do with your eyesight?

HW: It very well may. In fact I recall that when we talked about my photography in the initial interview in *LensWork* #26, I talked a little about the fact that I'm very near-sighted. I tend to miss a lot of the details when I look out at the world. My corrected vision at it's best is about 20/40. It's great for photography by the way, but you probably don't want to drive down the road with me! When I photograph, I



“Grille Detail, 1933 Marmon, 2001”

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squint at the subject matter as I'm initially looking at it. This tends to turn off all of the details in the scene and I'm able to see just the forms and shapes. By doing this, I'm able to organize the composition more easily. In terms of structure and form, I'm not overly-concerned about what the details are.

BJ: When I look at photographs, I often try to put them in context of other photographers' work I've seen who have photographed a similar subject. It helps me understand what I'm looking at when I see it contextually. One of the bodies of work that came to mind when I was looking at your photographs of cars was the photographs of a friend of yours, John Sexton, and his photographs of the space shuttle. His work is so completely different photographically even though it's just as mechanical and metallic as your cars. Where his pictures are pictures *of* the space shuttle, your pictures are *not* pictures of cars.

HW: I would agree with that. I think it was Minor White who suggested – and I'm paraphrasing here – that one should photograph things for what they are and what *else* they are. I try to do that. I try to abstract the world in such a way that when you look at it, it could be any number of things. The fact that these photographs are of cars probably doesn't matter ... intellectually anyway.

BJ: It's always fascinating to talk with you about your creative process. Thanks for sharing your work, again, with *LensWork*.

HW: My pleasure.

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"Saleen SR-7, 2005"

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"Horn Detail, 1910 Rolls Royce, 2005"

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