

# pdn

## THE PHOTO COMMUNITY ISSUE

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Do you have an interesting photography project? Contact section editor Conor Risch at PDN, 770 Broadway, 8th floor, New York, NY 10003 or e-mail [conor.risch@nielsen.com](mailto:conor.risch@nielsen.com).

## MYTHOLOGY

# THE HERO'S JOURNEY

IN HER NEW BOOK OF COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS THAT ARE OFTEN BRIGHT, FANTASTICAL AND MELANCHOLY ALL AT ONCE, CIG HARVEY TAKES US ON A HIGHLY PERSONAL JOURNEY THAT WE CAN ALL RELATE TO. BY CONOR RISCH

**AT THE BEGINNING** of Cig Harvey's new book we're told that it is "A Love Story," but really it's much more than that. It's also about an artist's relationship to her medium and how she uses it to escape, explore, translate, lament and celebrate life. And it's about how to take what is intensely personal—experiences, emotions, ideas, dreams—and use those things to create photographs that anyone might engage with, understand and in some way make their own.

As the title of the book, *You Look at Me Like an Emergency* (Schilt Publishing), might suggest, Harvey's story has its ups and downs. When she began making the photographs ten years ago, she was digging into her past. "Typically my work is about relationships and I was looking at past relationships and patterns that I was going through," she recalls. Mostly her work was about "all these dismal failures of relationships."

In her notebook she'd sketch out notes for the images she wanted to make. "I would brainstorm different metaphors and symbols. What's the right light to tell the story? What's the right color? And so they were quite heavily planned," she says. But, she adds, "The moment I pick up the camera I try and forget all of that, because if I'm referring to the notebook while I'm actually shooting then the images just end up feeling really forced."

The majority of the early images that make up the first part of the book are self portraits. In one photograph Harvey sits on the stairs of an apartment building in a pink strapless cocktail dress. The scene has a predominantly blue tone, while the hallway light and exit sign glow different shades of green and a window is blown out white. In another image we see Harvey diving into the ocean headfirst from some unseen boat or platform or dock. She is in up to her shoulders, and her body, bare legs and feet extend out of the water at an angle. In another she poses in a yellow dress outside of a closed poolside bar, head cocked as if to say, "What now?"

Harvey says she uses color to "seduce." But, she adds, "for me it's not just about color, it's also the light that I'm shooting in and what that does to color, so I think the light really defines the language that I want the photograph to talk in."

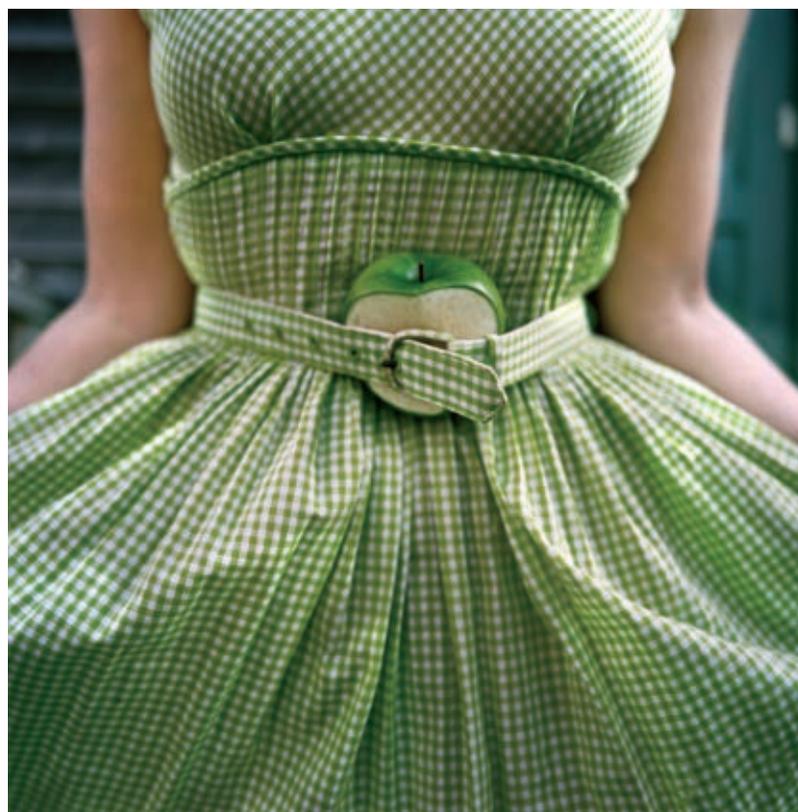
Throughout the book she combines her images with texts excerpted from her written journals, which are printed opposite and over the photographs in a handwritten script. In part one of the book they say things like: "He said, 'I don't always feel like you want me to feel.' But I only hear what I want to hear." Or, "I know how it feels to keep fear quietly contained."

When Harvey used herself in the images, her face is often obscured. "I never really saw it as this is only my story," she says. "The stories are so everyday and they're stories that we all go through."

In the second part of the book Harvey introduces new characters, most of them young girls—family members and neighbors—and uses herself less. Rather than digging into her past, she was facing present-day challenges—a complication during her niece's birth, her grandmother's passing, the betrayal of a best friend—and photographing what was in front of her. Yet, she says, even her photographs of neighbors or family members were highly personal.

"It could be a portrait of my neighbor but it's much more about a concern that I have," she says. "That moment I've chosen to press the shutter explains more about

**When Cig Harvey began making the work in her new book she was digging into the relationships of her past, creating highly conceptual photographs—many of them self portraits—that were metaphors for her personal experiences.**



BOTH PHOTOS © CIG HARVEY

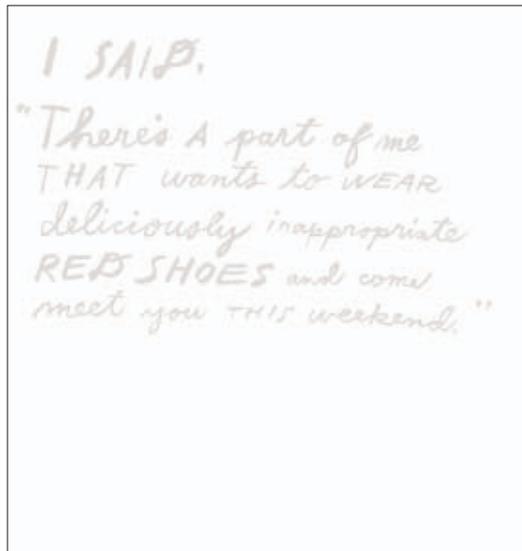
# EXPOSURES

what's going on with me than it does ever about her."

Harvey uses people she knows in her images because she's "always been interested in this idea of what's universal in a portrait," she says. "I love when I photograph someone and I don't recognize them in that moment, and then they give me a look that I don't quite understand." It's at this point that a family member or friend ceases to be familiar and takes on a more universal role. "At what point is it your neighbor ... and at what point [are they] just a stand-in for humanity?" Harvey asks. "That's really what I'm interested in. It's almost the anti-portrait, in a sense."

When Harvey made the photographs in the third part of the book she had met and married her husband, Doug, and found a sense of community and stability in their home in Maine that she'd been missing. There are images of her husband standing in the rain next to an old red truck. Of Harvey standing in the bow of a rowboat as it approaches shore. Of a yellow dog digging in the snow.

Harvey built the narrative in three parts based loosely on the "monomyth" structure established by writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell, which is often used in screenwriting (while admitting it's a bit of a funny comparison, Harvey references *Star Wars*, which was written by George Lucas, a Campbell fan): in part one we meet the hero of the story, who "keeps making the same mistakes again and again," she says. Then the hero sets out on a journey, where she faces challenges and outside forces, realizes some form of victory and, in part three, returns home. "Coming home, for me, was meeting [my husband] Doug and creating a life



here in Maine," she explains.

Harvey thought she'd finished her book four years ago, but after putting together a mockup the project "felt cold," she says, and she realized she needed to add images and change the design, which she spent the next couple of years doing while also teaching and working commercially. Then photographer Dave Anderson introduced Harvey to publisher Maarten Schilt, and they decided early this year to produce the book.

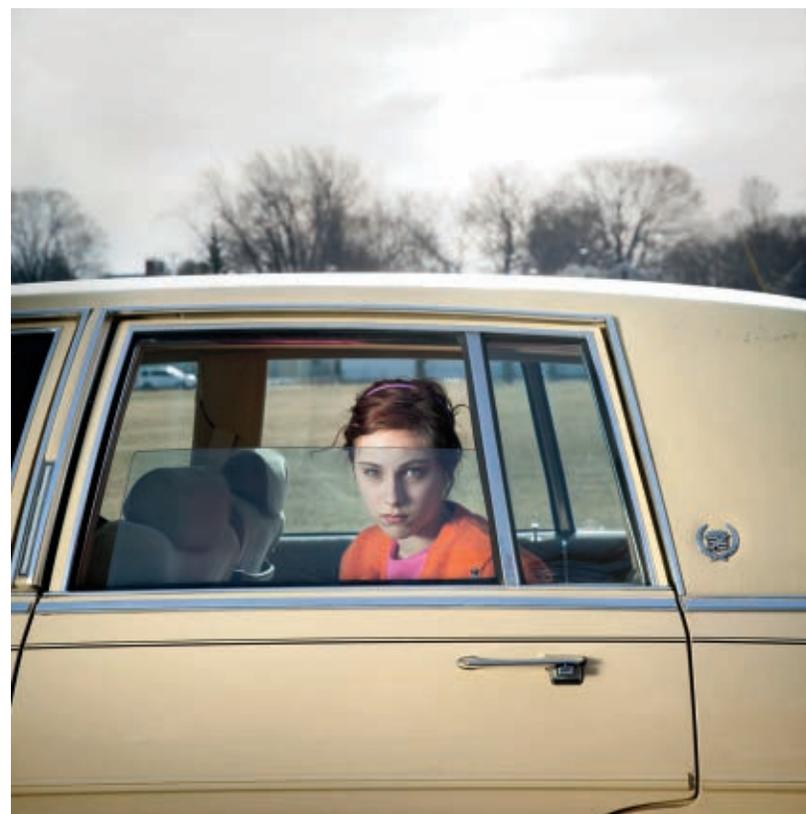
When she began the work, Harvey says, photography was an escape. "My own life was really hectic so I made these fantastical landscapes and put myself in

them as a way to escape my real life in a sense," she recalls. Now a mother to a young girl, Harvey's work has changed again. "Now I'm much more grounded and have no need to escape, so I can look at things that are a little darker," she says. "I seem to always photograph the opposite of what I'm feeling."

As she's always done, though, Harvey is making personal images that she hopes can "become universal."

"When an image can do that—and it's not very often when it does—it's amazing."

*Harvey is exhibiting her work this month at Robin Rice Gallery in New York City.*



ALL PHOTOS © CIG HARVEY

Clockwise from top: Harvey included short texts taken from her journals in the book; as her work progressed, she used herself less and began photographing people she knew—most of them young girls.