

On Memories, Maps, Stains, and Others

## Nessia Pope in Conversation with Bastienne Schmidt

**NP** This is our second interview together. I am honored to be involved in your new book and very pleased to see that your work has come full circle. Is that the idea of this book—the confirmation of a journey?

**BS** Thanks for continuing our dialogue. Yes, this book is about journeys. Traveling and being exposed to different parts of the world influenced me as an artist early on. As a child, our parents would pack the five kids in our old Ford Taunus and drive 1,000 miles from Greece to Germany, crossing into Yugoslavia, Italy, and Austria. These summer trips were incredibly inspiring. We were the moving part wrapped tightly like a cocoon; passing through changing landscapes; seeing the difference in the physical structures of houses and storefronts; watching people working in the fields. In my mind, I compared all of these small visible systems of life. I think that's where I get my love of typologies, topographies, and maps.

**NP** Seems like such a happy childhood! Although the landscapes and cultures are wildly distinct from one another, you are attracted by forms and patterns that have a common denominator: large scale earth formations, the undulations of nature, weaving lines, the meticulous arrangements of knotted cords, and taut looms.

**BS** It was an idyllic childhood in the sense that there was a lot of freedom and space to wander. I was pretty much a daydreamer. Forms and patterns always interested me, from the smallest organism observed under a microscope to the massive landscape seen from an airplane.

**NP** The idea of macrocosm and microcosm is always present in your work—what you see from above and what you see from below. I remember you telling me that this is a process that is understood better with age ...

**BS** When I was in my teens and twenties, there was always the urge to go out into the world, to explore and discover. The older I get, the more I realize that these principles are very similar. In my photographs and drawings, I like to change the perspective and viewpoint. Reorganizing the plane of perception feels very freeing to me.

**NP** In your works on paper, you utilize coffee, ink, polymer paint, lint, soap—all humble materials. Your drawings are very delicate, like Chinese landscapes, yet they have rich textures and carry much information; they seem to reflect the complexity of the world. Is that what you have in mind? The patterned layers overlap and float on the page. How do you achieve this result?

**BS** I am in part inspired by the long format of Japanese and Chinese scroll drawings, in terms of delicacy and complexity. As an underpinning to the drawings I often utilize thumbprints or man-made patterns on layers of transparent paper. At times, I only draw

mountains and lakes. They become structures, made by mixing coffee with inks, polymer paints, and embedded strings, which I will later use as elements in my drawings. I experiment with materials, and especially enjoy exploring the absorptive capacity of paper. I am obsessed with stains.

**NP** I know you like stains! People normally hate stains. From a domestic point of view, they are there to be removed. How appropriate you make landscapes that look like stains.

**BS** When you pour liquid on a page there is an element of being in control and not in control. There is the moment of excitement of the action and the fear of “messing up.” The stain that occurs is just an expansion of space. I enjoy the series Stains by Ed Ruscha very much—the cataloging of stains. Every stain has a history and a process. **NP** Do you think of process—your process—as the work of a woman in the kitchen? Your photographic production has very deep feminist connotations. But I also see a strong connection with Arte Povera artists.

**BS** I definitely take a lot of cues from domestic materials, like a reinterpretation of a feminist model. Arte Povera used stronger materials, such as stone, metal, and coal, while I use ephemeral materials fabric, paper, soaps, and coffee. I like the idea of poor and recycled materials. There was a wall drawing of Sol Lewitt at my college in Italy; the humble materials on a found surface left a deep impression on me.

**NP** The notion of space plays an important role, principally in your photographs. Many times the object looks simplified with space taking over. I love the volumes that result from this combination of “weights.” **BS** Space is a concept of the mind. I have no concern to make the space real, because I know that is a construction of an idea where I am faced with innumerable possibilities. A piece of paper is a space. To see something up close is a different idea of space than being far away. **NP** There is no such thing as one big center!

**BS** True, in my drawings and paintings there is no center. **NP** What do you usually do when you travel? Do you draw or edit the photographs or do you wait until you are back at the studio? **BS** When I am on a trip I am taking everything in. Seeing, touching, smelling, and feeling are usually very intense. It takes me a while to digest what I have experienced. I like to mix the images—a photograph from Burma can be read in context to one from Egypt. I rarely draw on a trip, I am collecting ideas and my camera is my sketchbook. **NP** I have a feeling that you are a very bad tourist in the classic sense of the word.

**BS** That’s funny, but totally true. Even if I have a guide I am always running off on my own. I need the sense of quiet to be able to think, and walk, and explore.

**NP** You utilize architectural details or footprints of buildings like temples to develop the idea of identity and place, which is essential in your work. You define country borders and maps, inventing them as the work develops. The universe is redrawn as you see fit—a conceptual journey I would say.

**BS** I am creating mind maps that carry visual memories from places that I have been to. Traces and footprints left on the physical ground are reminders of the intangible force of nature and the randomness of borders created by mankind. In contrast, nature draws borders very clearly—mountains or oceans divide places. I am interested in these spaces in between.

**NP** You pair the works in a very lyrical, poetic way. They complement each other. What directs your choices?

**BS** The process of pairing images is a combination of structure and playfulness. It's a journey where one image will lead me to the next, a movie without words, a wandering inside the mind. I change the sequence often during the process to open myself to other possibilities. Each time you change the position of an image you tell a different story.

**NP** This is your fifth book. Does making books inform your work? Do you think about the next publication when you are developing a body of work?

**BS** Somehow, it always does inform my work—a cross-feeding of form and content. I love making books, so whenever I work on a long-term project, the thought of a book is on my mind. I learned years ago from the photographer Ralph Gibson—who is a master when it comes to conceptualizing his work in books—that you have to take ownership of your work. In terms of photographic images, on one hand, I draw from my archive, and on the other I create images that belong to a particular narrative. There is a lot of structure and play at work. My previous book *Home Stills* was about a fictional “housewife,” a lone figure who ventured out into different landscapes. With *Topography of Quiet*, there is no longer a figure to be seen—it's all about being in space.