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John Goodman in Black & White & Color

By Peggy Roalf Thursday March 8, 2012

Photographer John Goodman is enjoying the glow of limelight, with two shows currently up and a third scheduled to open in April. I caught up with him en route to and from the west coast last week for this Q&A.



Left to right: Reflect/Tuscany, 1995; 3 Women/Havana, Cuba, 2000; Headless + Bag, Times Square Gym, 1993. Copyright John Goodman, courtesy Howard Yezerski Gallery.

Peggy Roalf: With three exhibitions scheduled almost back-to-back, what was your point of departure in selecting the work for each show?

John Goodman: Each of the three exhibitions is different starting with the show "Echo" at the Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston (curated by Bonnell Robinson) which deals with my interest in the struggle between dark, light, tenderness and grit, man and woman, and my fascination with the body. The San Francisco exhibition "The Same Dark Place" at the Scott Nichols Gallery focuses on work from my book *The Times Square Gym*, a series of boxing images coupled with photographs shot on the streets of Havana and in a wrestling gym there, which mirrors the boxing images.

"Moments Abstracted," which opens in April at the University of Maine Bangor is a wider survey of my work. It is curated by the director George Kinghorn, who has found transitional images that link my various projects together into one larger whole and also features color work from the 1970's and 1980s, Ektachrome and Kodachrome slides that I just recently discovered in a

studio move and printed for the first time. The three shows each have their own point of view and emphasis; they share some imagery but are a different look at my work as a photographer.

PR: What was it like looking over your career in the process pulling work for the exhibitions?

JG: The last couple of years I have spent a lot of time trying to catch up to myself and reviewing what I have shot during my career. All this began with a studio move and my decision to not simply move everything but instead to spend some time going through all that I had shot in almost 30 years of making pictures. At times this has been a monotonous and painful task but when I made a discovery and found something I had overlooked, the process became worthwhile—and at times even euphoric.

I know now that for about 20 years I hurtled from one assignment to another with very little time to think in between. Through this process of review, I now have a much better understanding of myself as a photographer and as a person.

PR: What were you involved with when you stumbled upon the Times Square Gym as a subject for a book? Could you talk about how you became immersed in the subject and how you strategized shooting in New York while living in Boston?

JG: I discovered the Times Square Gym one day in 1993 when I was walking through Times Square and looked up and saw some interesting typography backlit in a window. I stopped, took a picture of the building glowing in the darkness, and then proceeded to walk up the stairs to the second floor; here I was met by the manager Willie Dunne, who wanted to know “what the...I wanted.”

I told him I saw the sign from the street, that I was a photographer and wanted to come in and make a few pictures. Very reluctantly he let me in and after about 10 minutes of somewhat tentative shooting I left. A few weeks later I had some other work to do in New York and I brought a half dozen prints for Willie to take a look at. He reviewed them for about 20 seconds and then said to me “you are welcome here; do whatever you want.” Thus the pattern was set. I would come down to New York from Boston usually to shoot an assignment and then I would stop by the gym and shoot four rounds of photography. I never wanted to overstay my welcome, so I made it short, sweet and tried to not get in the way. This went on for a little over a year and then the building was taken over by the Times Square Renewal project, closed and demolished. Conde Nast world headquarters was built on the site of the gym.

Crossing the street and going into the gym changed my life as a photographer. It was a world in itself, a great place for me to photograph and explore movement, portraiture, abstraction and even fashion as I tried to capture the essence of the people and the place. Everything I had done previously as a photographer somehow found a place in the pictures that I made at the gym. I had found “my place” and the pictures poured out of me.



Three from the Ballet series, copyright and courtesy John Goodman.

PR: Another extended series, *Ballet*, brings together the beauty and grace of the dance with a grittiness that characterizes this world as it plays out off stage. Do boxers and ballerinas have much in common?

JG: In the *Ballet* series I saw the same strength, determination and discipline that I had witnessed in boxers at the Times Square Gym. The ballerinas struggle and train every day to get to a better place, to understand more, become more fluid, more proficient. They are tough and I loved that about them.

Not only do I think the boxers and ballerinas have a lot in common, I also feel that the way they work and train, striving to get better daily at what they do, is a lot like my experience as a photographer. My life as a photographer is a singular, solo existence that requires constant training to stay sharp, open and be ready for the next moment when something is revealed.

PR: What was your greatest influence in shooting black and white?

JG: My greatest influence in shooting black and white could very well be the Polaroid camera I was given on my 10th birthday. I still remember seeing the grey metal camera for the first time and I soon became the family photographer and was captivated by the immediacy of the pictures, mesmerized by the smell of the fixer pod and the magic of it all.

I shoot film and make most of my black-and-white prints in my darkroom. This act completes and informs my picture making. For me, it is vital to spend an extended time in the solitude of the darkroom with a negative to really know the image and determine how it should feel and how it should speak with its contrast and its tonality. The black-and-white print as an object is something that is very essential and important to me. I was taught by a master, Minor White, who not only opened me up to find my way of seeing but he also showed me the wonders of a silver gelatin print.

PR: Your career in photography seems to be a true balancing act. How do you engineer not just the time but also the ability to concentrate on the different requirements of commercial and personal work?

JG: There is a lot of juggling to do in life and certainly in a career in photography. We are all carpet-bombed with non-stop data and information. I work on clearing a place for myself to stop and think so I am able to see.

I have taken to heart all the commissions I have had and enjoy the collaboration with talented photo editors and art directors. I have been broadened by the travel and the access to amazing people and places. All this informs my personal work, allows me to experiment with ideas, and push myself as I see the world.

I continually work on my personal projects and make as much time as possible to focus on what I want and need to explore photographically. I think the key to keeping all this in balance comes from the imagery I make. When I shoot a commission it has to have some real overlap with what I am truly interested in otherwise it is all counter-productive. All the pictures have to come from the same place, you the photographer. I am always looking for my truth and another moment of discovery. Photography is a healthy endeavor; it keeps you on your toes; you have to stay involved to connect with all that is swirling about as you keep your balance.

PR: What advice would you give a talented young photographer who is just beginning to achieve some recognition?

JG: I think the most important thing you can do as a photographer is to respect the medium and yourself. Be true to both, make pictures that really mean something to you. Have your own voice. Photography is just too wonderful a medium to handle any other way.

John Goodman | *The Same Dark Place* continues through April 28 at [Scott Nichols Gallery](#), 49 Geary Street, San Francisco, CA.

John Goodman | *Echo* continues through March 13 at [Howard Yezerski Gallery](#), 460 Harrison Street, Boston MA.

John Goodman's work is represented in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His work has appeared in New York Times Magazine, Vanity Fair, Esquire, and Rolling Stone. Goodman studied with the photographer Minor White in the 1970's and is now on the faculty of the Art Institute of Boston.
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