BRUCE WILLEY

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Archival Print, 16 x 20 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

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In the Moment

Falling Leaf Photography

Photography concentrates one's eye on the superficial. For that reason it obscures the hidden life that glimmers through the outlines of things like a play of light and shade. One can't catch that even with the sharpest lens. One has to grope for it by feeling.

—Franz Kafka

Photographs of falling leaves are either mistakes or strokes of luck. Gravity, light, and leaf must all come together at a single moment in the great mystery of autumn. As metaphor, the falling leaf awakens us to the fleeting present, reminding us that life is best lived with the spontaneity of *now.* The falling leaf forces us to rethink our relation to nature and time. A Zen master said, "Awakening to this present instant, we realize the infinite is the finite of each instant."

The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, considered by many the father of photojournalism, said that he thought of himself as a Zen archer, becoming the target in order to "see" the subject he was making a picture of. In this way he sought to seize the moment. "Thinking should be done beforehand and afterward," he said. "Never while actually taking the photograph."

So it is that for the past few years I have dedicated myself to capturing one small but significant moment in the natural history of deciduous trees. The moment when a leaf abandons its potent attachment to the tree, strikes out on its own, and floats down to Earth.

It is not easy making photographs of these moments. A hot-tempered, boozed-up hummingbird would be easier to ensnare photographically. Once a leaf becomes airborne it takes on a personality of its own, swayed by the bind of nature and nurture—wind, water, temperature, photoperiod (the lengths of day and night), and the shape and weight of the leaf. Only a few fly perfectly like paper airplanes, gliding graciously into the viewfinder. Most spin and weave and flail in the air for just seconds before cluttering the ground to become the bane of rake and blower, or to enrich the layer of compost on the spongy forest floor.

These airborne moments are transcendent, graceful affairs, playing out billions of times in the autumn air. They are the moments when part of the tree sheds its source of gathering sunlight for photosynthesis and goes into dormancy until spring. All at exactly the point of the departed leaf, the zone of abscission, the bundle scar.

For those that know their way around an f-stop and a shutter speed, I use a long zoom lens (Canon 70–200mm L-Series 2.8) attached to a DSLR Canon 5D Mark II body. (I use digital because trying this with film would bankrupt me.) In order to isolate the falling leaf from the busy background of tree trunks, stems, and leaves that have yet to

fall, a wide-open f-stop (f 2.8-3.5) is key. This complicates the challenge of getting the leaf in focus, but a wide-open lens lets more light into the camera, allowing the crucially fast shutter speed that these photos need. (The shutter, by the way, is often called a "leaf.")

Because the leaf is often flitting rapidly in the dappled light of the woods, I focus the lens manually (autofocus is usually attracted to the background rather than the fast-falling leaf). I chase the leaf hither and thither all the way to the ground, hoping that at least some of it is in focus.

As with any artistic project, photographing falling leaves is best with some rules and constraints: No mendacious use of Photoshop with a leaf spilled into a better background. No manually throwing the leaves in the air or employing a ladder with a rhinestone-clad assistant atop it. No strings or monofilament line attached. And no monkey business like shaking the leaves out of the tree. Nothing but the leaf leaving its nine-month mooring by natural means.

Would simply watching the leaves fall without documenting them photographically bring the same pleasure of awakening? What changes the experience when you have a record of it? Thinking about falling leaves comes afterward, if at all. Watching the leaf zigging and zagging has forced me into the humble moment that is part and parcel to the grand connectedness of life.

Collectively, leaves and humans make a measurable impact on the Earth. Consider the Keeling Curve, the iconic study of the world's fluctuating (increasing) CO_2 levels. Using measurements from instruments based on the top of Mauna Loa in Hawaii, the curve plots the cyclic variation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, looking something like jagged waves climbing a steep slope of beach. The upswings of the waves result in part from all of those billions of leaves decaying on the ground. The downswings are all the new leaves photosynthesizing and taking the carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere in the spring. The disturbing thing about the Keeling Curve is the steep climb it has been making over the years, a soar that is caused by you and me.

To get an idea about how many leaves fall, it's best to step into the state of New Hampshire where "leaf peepers" come out en masse each fall, and long winters provide time to ponder questions about leaves. The *Telegraph Nashua* newspaper reports that the 4 billion trees living in the state produce 1.9 million tons of fallen leaves each season, according to an estimate by the U.S. Forest Service. Staggering numbers considering the imperceptible weight of a leaf in the hand.

Soon the leaves will be stripped from the trees. Already my favorite falling leaf-producing red maple—which gets the full brunt of breeze—is shorn, a skeleton of bones stabbed into the increasingly cold ground. So today, for a few hours at least, I'll watch the leaves fall one last time for the year. This time I won't bring the camera or the metaphors. Instead I'll attempt something I haven't really done before. To watch them fall plainly, without preconceptions. Crackling leaves underfoot, flittering flights of fancy in the air, I open my senses to the moment.

Formerly from Santa Cruz, California, writer and photographer **Bruce Willey** moved due east to the Owens Valley to be closer to the mountains. He lives with his wife, daughter, and catahoula leopard hound. Considered by many to be the world's foremost authority on falling leaf photography, Willey is also working on a novel titled *The Great Sierra Nevada Unconformity,* which won't be published any time soon.

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