

## Pop Quiz

George Slade

“With the confluence of light, circumstance, chance and a dozen other factors I attempt to conjure up a world, one seemingly half-imagined and breathing with the life of histories.”

## 10 Questions with: Lois Conner



*Russell, Colorado, 1990*

**The American artist** Lois Conner (born 1951) is among the great contemporary photographers utilizing large-format negatives. Conner earned degrees in photography at Pratt Institute (BFA, 1975) and Yale University (MFA, 1981). A 1979 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship was the first of many awards and fellowships, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1984 and an Anonymous Was a Woman Fellowship in 2007. In 2010 and 2011 she was an artist-in-residence in the Sol LeWitt Studio in Praiano, Italy. Her work has been published in numerous monographs and solo exhibition catalogues. Exhibitions of her photographs have been held in the United States, Switzerland, China, England and Canada. She has held teaching and research positions at Stanford University, Yale, Sarah Lawrence College (NY), Princeton University, University of Hartford (CT) and the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou.

*You have made a particular format your trademark.*

*Tell me about it.*

In 1982, I switched from the classical shape of the 8x10-inch view camera to the elongated rectangle of the 7x17-inch banquet camera. This allowed for a different narrative framework. The horizon it permitted stretched out as though encompassing the curvature of the earth.

*What attracted you to this kind of photography?*

Large-format cameras allow for an extraordinary level of description. The platinum printing process can render these negatives with an incredible subtlety of the tonal scale, describing a three-dimensional space like no other medium.

*How do you find and pursue your subject matter?*

What initially sends me out into the world is often a story, photograph or painting; some aspect of the world that haunts me because of its absolute unfamiliarity, its beauty or incomprehensible existence. Trying to render a visual encounter through photography is nearly impossible. Bending and twisting what

the camera faithfully describes into something of fiction in order to give form and meaning to what exists in front of you. With the confluence of light, circumstance, chance and a dozen other factors I attempt to conjure up a world, one seemingly half-imagined and breathing with the life of histories. Each project informs and challenges the next one. Some projects last decades. Others are for weeks. No rules were drawn up. I didn't know the years would pass by so quickly.

*You have photographed extensively in China. How did your interest in working there evolve?*

China has 5,000 years of history, and poses different challenges and questions that need to be explored and answered visually. My interest in the extended frame of the panorama was one of my original interests in traveling to China, as the elongated form for Chinese painting originated in scrolls. I couldn't have known that there would be such dramatic changes over the decades. I couldn't

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Continued...

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have gone there so often to make work if I hadn't also been working on other projects here in New York, the American West and different cities across the country, and in Europe and Asia.

*You have dedicated a significant amount of time to teaching photography. Would you expound a bit on the role of teachers and teaching?*

My teachers and mentors have been integral in helping me find my way, my voice. Philippe Halsman encouraged me to become a photographer when I was taking his portraiture class at the New School. At Pratt, Alan Newman taught me how to use the view camera, which changed my life, as it gave me a reason to pause. He and I also collaborated on a grant to research platinum printing my last year there. Philip Perkis, also at Pratt, was a visionary critic and teacher. His words still run through my mind.

*The photography program at Yale has been central to your professional life. Tell me about your teachers—later, colleagues—there.*

Tod Papageorge was an uncompromising yet poetic critic, whose respect and expectations for the medium were the foundation for the Department at Yale. Under his tutelage my years there as a student and as a teacher were critical to my voice as an artist.

*Who else at Yale played a role?*

Richard Benson (born 1943, died 2017) was a big part of my artistic life. I want-

ed to meet him because of the incredible platinum prints he made for a 1977 exhibition of Tina Modotti's work at the Museum of Modern Art. Later he became my professor, my friend, my colleague and, as Dean of the Yale School of Art, my boss. In each of these roles, he was encouraging, yet not overly so. He left a lot of space open for criticism and humor, looking at photographs and embracing the world as a miraculous place.

*What made Benson so special as a photographic artist?*

He was always reassessing, inventing, figuring out new ways to print and to better render what the camera makes. He was a master printer in many processes (from dry plate to digital) and an inventor of several exacting, time- and labor-intensive ones. He was always looking forward to finding another way to lay down the camera's rendering, what one saw in the negative, and later in the digital file. His last pictures were exhibited on special monitors whose rendering of the tonal scale of color digital files was definitive.

*During your residencies in Sol LeWitt's studio you took an interesting turn in your work and began making double exposures in color. How did that come about?*

Living for months with Sol LeWitt's fresco paintings and drawings made me reconsider particular details in the landscape—jet trails, webs, nests, fences, stones, water drops, roads, walls, walk-

ways, tiling and mesh—as part of an organizing system that could be imposed on the landscape. In my first weeks in Praiano I collected flowers that had dropped along the paths, bits and pieces of old discarded tiles from the olive groves that I photographed and odd, twisted pieces of wood and wire from the garden outside. I thought comparing the scale of LeWitt's paintings with these small objects could complicate our conversation. This work called for a different kind of transparency in which color was essential, a layering that would both separate and unite the images.

*You also put work on Instagram, which is clearly a change of pace from the banquet camera and the gorgeous platinum prints. Technology marches on. How are you coping with the changing availability of supplies for your signature, wide-format images?*

The materials are easily acquired for platinum printing, much more so now than when I began in 1974. Buying 7x17 film has sometimes been a challenge. I switched to Ilford about eight years ago when Kodak began scaling down, and I order film once a year as before. Color film has become very expensive, like the black and white. I've always used film, but now digital is also in the mix, with the iPhone, the Nikon and, more recently, the Hasselblad. They don't replace film, they just add other possibilities and challenges.

*(To see more, visit [loisconner.net](http://loisconner.net).)*