



Darius Himes

Interview: Jennifer Krasinski
Images: John Edmonds

Before becoming the International Head of Photographs at Christie's less than two years ago, Darius Himes led many lives. From his early years as the Editor of Photo-Eye Booklist, to his co-founding of Radius Books, to serving as Director of San Francisco's legendary Fraenkel Gallery, Himes has always been guided and inspired by a life-long passion for photography.

Throughout his career, Himes has worked to preserve and promote photography's history and heroes while also championing young artists. Those who meet him quickly understand that he possesses enthusiasm and gentility in equal measure, and that when he speaks of photography – of its rich past as well as its complex present – it's with a palpable reverence for the medium's ceaseless power to materialize the countless visions of our one world. He and I sat down on a warm evening in midtown Manhattan to talk about what propelled a man who grew up in a tiny town in the Midwest to become one of the leading forces shaping photographic culture – and what he believes to be the essential roles we all must play to keep the art form vibrant and thriving.

JK Is there a single image you remember that first mesmerised you, that made you want to become involved in photography?

DH I can't remember when I *didn't* want to be involved in photography. I grew up in a farming town of 130 people in Iowa; the closest city with a cultural core to speak of was Chicago, and we would make summer road trips to visit. I can still recall the amazing Georgia O'Keeffe painting of the clouds that hangs just inside the entrance of the Art Institute of Chicago, and how entranced I was by that work. Like so many other American children, my grandparents gave us kids an annual subscription to *National Geographic*. I have a feeling the work of Sam Abell and others routinely published in that magazine made a lasting impression.

JK What prompted you to first pick up a camera?

DH When I became more consciously and openly interested in photography, my parents bought me a 35 mm camera and a copy of *Black & White Photography: A Basic Manual* by Henry

Horenstein. The Harry Callahan image on the cover still conjures up those childhood memories in Iowa. I was making photographs all my childhood but I was completely untrained. I attended kindergarten through high school under one roof, in a rural public school; my parents are not artistic, but they were not obstructionist about my interest in art. In fact, they were very encouraging. So I was self-directed until I went to Arizona State University and studied photography formally. My professors there completely lit me on fire: the historian Bill Jay, and curator and writer William Jenkins, as well as artists James Hajicek and Mark Klett all deepened my love for the history of the medium.

JK And its materiality?

DH Yes, absolutely. That goes straight back to my time in art school. I remember Bill Jay at the front of the lecture hall animatedly



re-enacting the laborious nature of working as a photographer in the 19th century, hauling glass plates around with bottles of silver nitrate, gun cotton and ether. He told us that at that point in time there had been over 800 individual photographic processes invented and developed. To a young photographer, it was mind-blowing! He taught us about the rich legacy of experimentation and invention that led to the spontaneous birth of photography in different locales. And in the darkroom we were all working with different types of papers, mixing our own chemistry, experimenting with 'alternative' and 19th century processes. This period was the foundation of my love of the materiality of photographic history.

JK How did this lead to your interest in photography books, and to the founding of Radius Books?

DH There are four of us who founded the company, and we established it as a

non-profit art book publishing entity. Each of us came from art and book-related backgrounds. After working overseas in Israel with a permanent collection of historical photographs for some years, I moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1998, where I worked for Photo-Eye Books during graduate school at St. John's College. I was the founding editor of a small quarterly journal called *The Photo-Eye Booklist* for about six years, which was the first and only journal dedicated to photography books. I know; super nerdy. During this time I had fallen more and more in love with the book format and had a strong desire to work directly with artists and to make books. The four of us were all living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and we each had aspirations to make beautiful book objects with artists. Radius Books wasn't, and isn't, just about photography. In our first years we were able to work with artists like John McCracken, Ed Moses, and Otto Rogers,

as well as Lee Friedlander, Mark Klett, Thomas Joshua Cooper and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. With *John McCracken: Sketchbook*, it turned out to be the last book he worked on before passing away. That was a very special time and project. We also made a point to publish first monographs for relatively young, unknown artists with a conscious emphasis on female artists. This list includes Renate Aller, Julie Blackmon, Suzan Frecon, Rebecca Norris Webb, Janelle Lynch, Colleen Plumb, Christina Seely, Michael Lundgren, David Taylor, and Aaron Huey. Radius Books was, and still is, very much about the belief that arts can be transformative. My friend and co-founder David Chickey runs the organisation as publisher, and I have the pleasure to serve on our board with David Skolkin, another co-founder.

JK Has your position at Christie's at all changed the way you view the role of art?



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DH At the core of who I am, I deeply believe that the arts – the visual, the written, and the performing arts – have a very important role to play in society. They cause us to reflect, teach us new truths, inspire, cajole, chastise, and confront us. And the arts have always required patronage, correct? These days, I’m interested in connecting with and cultivating people who see themselves as devoted patrons of the arts. I think it’s up to each of us to support the arts in our own way, in whatever capacity we can. And I believe that those who have been blessed with means – especially in a world where the extremes of poverty and wealth seem to be widening – have an increasingly greater responsibility to be involved in the cultural life of society, to support museums, and to nurture and support artists. This is how I see it. But I mean, it’s not like Christie’s called and said, ‘We want you to nurture the next generation of patrons.’

JK That wasn’t in the job description?

DH [laughs] Not really, but that *is* how I see what I do now, in some respects. Obviously, on the one hand, I manage an international department at the world’s most successful auction house. It is a very different landscape I occupy now than founding a non-profit publishing house, or being the director of a commercial gallery. But on the other hand, I work with many of the same people and types of photographic prints I’ve worked with in previous endeavours: my field is still the broad, magical history of photography, and I am working with collectors and curators and dealers that I have known for many years.

JK From your vantage point at Christie’s, what do you see as the market’s guiding influences? Is it only propelled by the collectors? The galleries? Or are there other forces at work as well?

DH That’s a good question without a simple answer. The market is a collective entity, of course; it’s multi-faceted. Which artists are being shown in galleries, in museums, featured in magazines; all of that has an influence on the minds of collectors. From a market perspective: there’s the *primary* market,

which is the space in which contemporary galleries operate. When an exhibition of new works is shown, that’s the first time they’ve been available to *the market*, to collectors. Then there is the *secondary* market, involving the sale of previously owned works. For the most part, this is the space where auction houses work, alongside great dealers and gallerists. As a general rule, what happens at an auction house is part of public record; they publish the results of their auctions. Galleries don’t. This is a major difference between the primary and secondary markets and the Internet has amplified that difference. Data is readily available for all to scrutinize, though I would warn against looking at the market solely through the lens of auction results, which are ultimately affected by too many variables to list. What I have found really interesting is that there are different psychologies around the primary and secondary markets...

JK How so?

DH Well, here’s one example: you and I and everyone else, we’re all consumers, right? When you go on eBay, for example, as a general rule, you’re in the mind-set to find a bargain. That’s the buying mentality. What they say about auctions is ‘the price can only go up’. There is a bottom threshold, but two people interested in the object can bid it up and up. A gallery is the exact opposite. There’s a retail price, and it can only go down (though if you wait *too* long, it might get raised due to shifts in the market). You can ask for a discount or try to negotiate with the dealer. Whereas at an auction you are confronted with the reality that this object is available for approximately *one minute in time*, and you’ve got to decide how high you’re going to go. Again, the psychology of buying is different, even if you’re talking about the exact same object.

JK What are people collecting these days? Are there trends that you see, or do collectors’ interests hold steady around certain artists, or certain kinds of work?

DH The history of photography covers a lot of ground: 1839 till tomorrow. There are key periods throughout

that 175+ year history, and there are key artists within each of those periods. The time period between the two World Wars gave birth to some of the most amazing and sought after artists around the world. When true masterworks become available by artists like Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Dorothea Lange, Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, or Duchamp, just to name a few, the collectors show up. But the post-war period of the 1950–70s witnessed some of the most important artists of the century, such as Robert Frank and Diane Arbus. Last spring Christie’s set a world record for price achieved at auction for Arbus. Her iconic portrait of the child holding the toy hand grenade sold for \$785,000. And of course the contemporary photography market of artists making work right now is quite thrilling.

JK I know you regularly visit art fairs. What’s the value of an art fair for someone who works in an auction house?

DH For anyone, a fair is a great chance to see lots of art and people at once! What are the galleries showing now? Which contemporary artists is there a buzz about? What are the current retail prices? Many curators and collectors visit fairs for exactly the same reasons; it’s the town square for the international photography community. It’s a chance to ask questions about objects and artists, and to keep your finger on the pulse of the photography community.

JK How do you go about finding new artists who interest you?

DH Well, I read *Foam Magazine!* [laughs] I do! I go to fairs; I visit galleries for openings on Thursday nights in New York; I do studio visits; I stay abreast of what publishers are doing; I talk to people all the time.

JK What do you tell young photographers who are looking to gain a foothold in the art world? When they ask you ‘How can I do this?’, what do you say?

DH Honestly, I say: ‘You should always be nice to people’, because it’s a small world and it’s nice to work with nice people.

- ^{JK} That's a very Mid-western answer, but I think you're absolutely right. [laughs]
- ^{DH} When you're young, it can be daunting to think about how to build a network or how to get your work in front of people. I tell artists not to focus on that, but to put all your energy into making great work. As you get older, the amount of time you're willing to give a project or a body of work will shift from the semester model to a 2 to 5 to 10 year model. I believe that the amount of time that you put into something is directly proportionate to its quality. Now, obviously, everybody works differently, and I don't just mean speed of one's technique. So if you use an 8x10 camera you're moving more slowly than if you're using a handheld camera. Longer technical processes don't necessarily mean better work. Ultimately, I don't care how you make work, or what tools you use. What I mean is that building a project and refining what you're doing can take time. Be sensitive to that, and focus first and foremost on making work you think is vital to this day and age. And along the way get involved in the community of the art world. You will work with numerous people in different capacities in your career and it's so important to simply meet people and find those that you resonate with.
- ^{JK} Are there any young artists that you're particularly interested in now? Any photographers who have caught your eye recently?
- ^{DH} John Chiara, Michael Lundgren, Richard Learoyd, Sasha Rudensky, Viviane Sassen, Todd Hido, Rachael Dunville, Jason Fulford, Mike Slack, Awoiska van der Molen, Hank Willis Thomas, Gregory Halpern, Judith Stenneken, Sabine Mirlesse, Mishka Henner, Lucas Blalock, Talia Chetrit, Farrah Karapetian, Shahrzad Kamel and Ruth van Beek, and, and, and.... so many, really.
- ^{JK} Where do you stand regarding digital photography? Some mourn that photographers have lost something of the craft because of all this new technology...
- ^{DH} Any new tool implies a new craft. I really don't care what tool an artist

uses ... and there's the opposite effect of this technology too, right? This happens all the time, I think, in any arena. As we move forward to new technologies, there's always that...I don't want to call it a backlash...what's the right word...?

- ^{JK} A return?
- ^{DH} Yes. *A return*. A rekindling of interest in 'the old'. In photography, it's an interest in all things analogue. There will always be a segment of artists looking to history all the while reinventing the medium. I had a chance to see an amazing exhibition at the Getty last year called *Light, Paper, Process*, which brought together contemporary artist photographers doing just that. Their work was essentially all analogue, but analogue re-invented. John Chiara, Chris McCaw, Jennifer Oppenheim, Matthew Brandt, Marco Breuer, and others – all are using what could be called established, analogue photographic methods, but they've hacked them in so many ways, with inspiring results. For instance, Chris McCaw puts sheets of gelatine silver paper in the camera in lieu of a negative and tracks the movement of the sun through a lens that has been calibrated to create a pin point focus of light on the paper, simultaneously exposing an image while leaving a burn mark on the paper itself. At the end of the day, I'm not averse to digital, or hand colouring, or absolutely any technical process of photography. I've seen amazing work using all of these techniques. If you're an artist, I really don't care how you make your work. Just make great work.
- ^{JK} One last question: as someone who's so excruciatingly busy, how do you balance work and life? How do you keep yourself vital and curious in the whirlwind of it all?
- ^{DH} That's a good question. I don't really know if I'm balanced! I'm very thankful for being able to continue to work in the field that I've been attracted to since childhood. I see myself primarily as an enthusiast and a supporter; I truly relish that role. My heart has always been focused on honouring great artists that have come before, and also on encouraging artists of my generation – how

I can promote them, help them make great work, and get that work out into the world. I'm happy that I can continue to find time to write, to lecture, to advise on publishing projects. And at the moment, I'm doing that by encouraging patrons to support artists in any way they see fit! That's my role, and I like doing it. Honestly, I'll talk to anybody about photography and the arts, whether underserved high school students or the world's 1%. Everyone should have a chance to know and appreciate the continuing history of this magical world of photography.

DARIUS HIMES (b. 1970, US) is the International Head of Photographs at Christie's, overseeing a global team in three locations. He is the former director of San Francisco's renowned Fraenkel Gallery, and in 2007 he co-founded Radius Books, a non-profit publisher of books on photography and the visual arts. Darius was the founding editor of *Photo-Eye Booklist*, a quarterly journal devoted to photography books. A lecturer and writer, he has also contributed to the likes of *Aperture*, *Blind Spot*, *Bookforum*, and *BOMB*.

JENNIFER KRASINSKI (b. 1970, US) is a prolific arts writer and critic based in the USA. She has written on the subject of art, film, video and performance for numerous publications such as *Art in America*, *Spike Art Quarterly* and *DIS Magazine*. Jennifer serves as a faculty member at both New York University's Steinhardt School and the School of the Visual Arts. She is the author of *Prop Tragedies* (Wrath of Dynasty Press, 2010).

JOHN EDMONDS (b. 1989, US) is an emerging photographer based in Connecticut, where he followed the prestigious MFA in Photography at Yale University. His work – which has been included in group shows internationally – forms part of the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.