

An interview with **Alexis Dahan**

By Dorian Grinspan, Yale
Portrait by Charles Guislain

Alexis Dahan's photography has a rawness and fragility to it. Although a study of his work may initially suggest a style of photography that is highly constructed, as seen in many of his commissioned editorials, Dahan's personal work betrays this sense of artifice. His recent work features urban skylines, with buildings underexposed so as to render them black, like negative space, and soft, cloudy skies offering a relief to the stark shapes of the buildings. From New York to Paris and Milan, Dahan presents us with a series of photographs that bind and frame these cities. Even his earlier personal work, like the series "Sports a Trois" from 2007, reveals a fascination with space, especially the negative, and abstractions. Dahan admits that one of his earliest and most influential mentors has been Olivier Zahm, founder of Purple, who commissioned Dahan to photograph Chloe Sevigny back in Dahan's greener days. Since then, the photographer has contributed regularly to Purple, supplementing his abstract personal work with commissioned portraiture or fashion photography. In this interview, Dahan talks about his early days as a writer, the distinction between art and commerce, and the transformative power of photography. Dahan's upcoming show, titled "The Lover's Body Parts Are Separated," will be on display at Half Gallery (208 Forsyth Street) in July.

How did you first get into photography?

When I was six years old, my mother's ex-boyfriend was an Italian photographer and he taught me. We were playing with his cameras, and it was my first contact with photography. My mother always had an old Pentax and I started to play with it later, at 15 years old, just taking photos of everything, my friends, the city, people in my class—collecting the faces that were around my life. If I would date a girl, I would take a lot of photos of her and then just keep them, like a souvenir, like a family album of photography.

What made you move from France to New York?

I was finishing a Master's in Literature in Paris and there was an application to get a scholarship from NYU. I wanted to leave Paris so I applied and I got it. I came here to study magazine journalism at NYU in 2004, 2005.

How did you decide to become a professional photographer?

I've always wanted to be a writer, and when I arrived here, I was writing English but not that well. I could write French, but I didn't want to go back because I loved New York. My roommate was an assistant photographer, and we would just play around with his camera. Eventually, I was like, okay, this is what I'm going to do—I'm going to start taking photos professionally. Right now, I'm focusing on developing my personal photography while continually growing my professional work.

How do you separate personal and professional? What are the differences between them?

The professional work is what I do when I'm commissioned to do something, so it's somebody else's idea. The goal is to bring an artistic vision to my work but mainly to make the person who commissioned the work happy, to get more work and to be paid, and to have a lifestyle. And personal work is the work where nobody else but me decides what is photographed, what for, why, how.

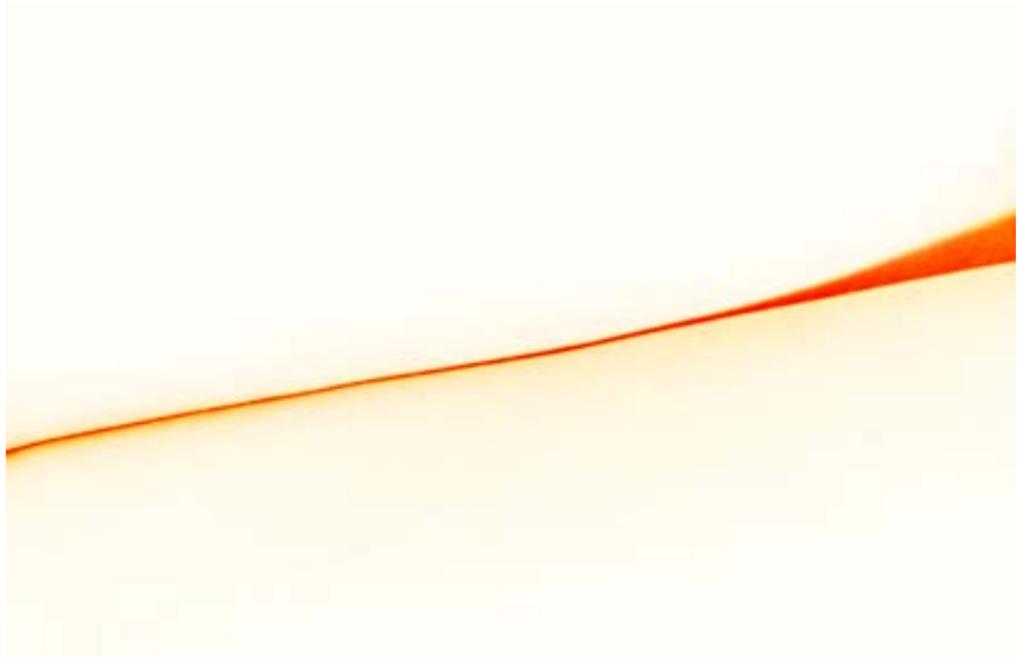
For your personal work, do you prefer photographing people or places?

I like taking photos of shapes. I am a fan of abstraction painting, and I even attempted a Kandinsky drawing myself. So personal work is really focused on how to use a camera, which is only supposed to record what's there, to record shapes that don't look very natural and harmonic, just lines, triangles, abstract ideas—the organization is calculated though.

Have you ever reached a level of perfection in your work?

I don't think the word "perfection" applies to artistic creation, not even by a personal standard. Usually, whenever I take a photo, I want to move on because I'm tired of it and I don't like it anymore.





Excerpt from *The Lover's Body Parts are Separated*, Alexis Dahan, 2012

But your series of the skyscrapers and the buildings was taken over a long period of time.

I've always been fascinated by sky shapes because whichever city you go to, the only experience of the sky you have in that city is the one that is shaped by the building lines in the streets.

Has that subject fascinated you for a long time?

Since I started to travel by myself when I was 18 years old. I traveled mainly around Italy, at first it was for pleasure but eventually studies. I spent a year in Siena where the experience of the sky is even smaller because the buildings are high and the streets are smaller, so you only get small lines of sky. And if you go into nature, then the sky takes everything, the sky is the biggest element in vision. But then as soon as you get into the city, the sky disappears and all you have is buildings.

Do you think photography has changed your perception of your surroundings?

Yes, I always look at things like they could be a possible image. The camera on the cell phone is like a notebook—instead of writing your thoughts, you record an image. You have to remember that photography comes from the Greek and means “writing with light.” I'm a writer who takes photos. I'm lucky, photography is a combination of my two passions.

Which photographers have influenced you the most?

Many photographers have influenced me, but I have two main mentors. The first one is Olivier Zahm who gave me my first assignment seven years ago to photograph Chloe Sevigny. I was not really a photographer then. He just asked me to do it for the magazine because we knew each other and he knew I wanted to do photography and he's always been pushing me to do more, to explore more with photography. He's one of the first who interested me with real assignments, a passion for portraits, for good publications.

You've photographed many people who are quite famous. How do you get your pictures to be natural?

A lot of it is just event photography, and these people are used to being photographed. These events, the only purpose is for these people to be photographed, to advertise whatever the sponsor is. There's absolutely no contact with them, it's just hello, can I take your photo, yes, click, next. Unfortunately, there is very little contact. When it's a commissioned portrait, however, then it becomes very interesting. The way I like to do it is to just hang out with the person as if I were writing an article about him, but instead it's taking a photograph and him telling me about his life at the same time. Commissioned portraits are probably one of the works I enjoy most.

Do you still write?

Yeah, I always write. Mostly it's theory about photography actually. I studied for six years so I still have the same kind of student inside me. I have a fantasy of one day doing a Ph.D. of photography because there's not much writing about photography. It's such a young medium.

Have you shown people your writing?

Nonfiction writing or fiction writing that I was doing early on, yes, to a few people. But it's not really enough to be public. It's better kept as personal writing.

What is your theory of photography, if you had to summarize it?

Photography is not a concept. First of all, it's an act. It's not so much about the photograph but the act of photographing yourself—stopping the time. If you see something you like, if it moves or not, you can take a photo of it, and it stops the time. There's a big relation with time, how it's freezing; you can even have a photo with movement in it, but it's frozen.

The same way Georges Bataille said that writing is the contrary of working—what you do isn't producing any wealth. When I take a photograph, it's completely superficial and not of any use to the world, but at the same time, I'm freezing a moment of my own visual fantasy and whether it's an assignment for a magazine or a personal work like abstract shapes or things like that, it has meaning. It's of no use. But, it has a usage for me—on the professional side, it's to make a living, and on the personal side, it's to accomplish myself as a human being. Its meaning comes from seeing something that nobody else can see but me and showing it to the world.

When you talk about photography, you're talking about personal fantasy; do you think photography is selfish?

Absolutely. It's from one point of view, from the one who's taking the photograph, it's very selfish. But every art is selfish. In its most accomplished way—which I'm not at yet, because I'm a young artist—it's complete individual expression. You can recognize a photograph by a major photographer immediately. There's no doubt. You see an Andreas Gursky photograph, and you know it's an Andreas Gursky photograph. It shows you something you didn't see before.

You've been distinguishing personal photography from fashion photography. What do you think about photographers like Mario Testino or Peter Lindbergh who focus on fashion photography? Do you think fashion photography is art?

Some of the images, probably not the most well-known, are very unique and very special. Let me first tell you what I think of these, because that will influence my answer. I think when one experiences art, it transforms your sensitivity, and you're not the same after you've experienced a real piece of art. So fashion photography, whose main role is to create an illusion that's going to indirectly sell the clothes that are photographed, can't be associated with art, because art's initial intention can't be one of commerce. It can't be anything but itself. If there is an intention that's not the one of the artist, into a creation whether it's a photograph or something else, it can't be art, it can only be a craft. And you know that on most of these big fashion shoots, it's not just the photographer. There are a lot of other people involved with a lot of different visions, and a lot of melting together to create these illusions that are beautiful and that we like to see. But they are not going to make you better once you've seen them.

What do you think is the relationship between artistic photography and commerce?

Artistic photography and commerce? Well, ask Larry Gagosian. There is a commerce of art and there is commercial photography, but those are two different things. The commerce of art is for the artist, the individual who has succeeded in carrying the art into his own vision. But commercial photography is the only way for an emerging photographer to make a living—the same way a writer would write articles for a newspaper before publishing his first novels, a painter would do illustrations for advertising in the 50s.

So you said that to create a piece of art, it has to change you. What is an artistic creation that changed you as a photographer and a person?

The first time you look at the full scale Sugimoto image, it's very intense. Your sensitivity has changed. You're not the same. Sugimoto is probably in my mind the most important photographer, because every image has an effect on you that you can't escape. It's really intense, and then you see things differently. You don't see the sea and the sky; you just see the line and the balance. It's a matter of taste. It's very personal. I'm not saying he's the best, I'm just saying he's the one that interests me the most.

How important is it for you to have a reference point or influence in your pictures?

The only way, I think, to create something that's relevant is by doing something that was not done before. Fortunately the photography medium is very young so you can easily know a lot about what was done, and so it's important to have these references and to be cultured in your medium to do something that was not done before. In the same way you would study Plato or Descartes, Comte or Hegel if you intend to have an original philosophical thought, you need to have an idea of what was done before. It's not important, it's necessary. You can't take a photo if you don't know photography. Or you're doing something that's a happy accident, luck.

How do you think personal relationships and connections have helped your work?

It's very, very irrational, especially in the fashion and publishing industries. You need a community to exist. You can't be on your own. You need people that have the means to make your work public and also to pay you, but there are no rules saying you have to be friends with this guy or this guy. You can be the best photographer, know everybody, have all the means in the world, and still not be published or make it. It helps to be wealthy or to be born in it—Terry Richardson is a good example. He's an amazing artist, he's accomplished his personal style, there's no doubt about it. But he was also the son of a prominent fashion photographer. Now you see the son of Patrick Demarchelier, who's a great photographer, who gets a lot of jobs. So it helps but at the same time it's not essential. There's no secret recipe for who will make it. There's always struggle and the door is always open behind you. You can always stop getting work and everything turns and you're gone for a long time. There are a lot of photographers who were big and are not big anymore. It's a weird, irrational industry.

So do you consider yourself a self-made man?

No, I don't. I'm self-made in the industry. Nobody ever helped me because I was who I am, I'm not the son of someone in the industry. But my family has been supportive of me and I probably wouldn't have made it very early if I didn't have this support. I'm not self-made. Helmut Newton was self-made. The self-made photographers were studying in Germany in the late 30s, they were Jewish, and they had to escape, go to war, they had crazy stories. Those were the first really important fashion photographers.

If you had any advice to give a young aspiring photographer—

I'm still a young aspiring photographer—a very young aspiring photographer. Keep shooting, keep digging, always always always. ●