

By Claire Sykes

**B**arbara Astman's hand-tinted, black-and-white photo murals and text-infused images emerged in the seventies. In 1980, she posed with household objects spray-painted red; in 1990, she added oil stick, melted wax, and earth to her large-scale photos of rotting fruit. By decade's end, she was layering and collaging peeled and scratched color Polaroids into woozy self-portraits and bold sociopolitical statements.

Look at her work and the first thing that strikes you is the sheer variety of media, subject matter, and style. Her photo-based images speak of identity and relationship, recollection and visual narrative—all framed by her experiences, emotions, and ideas.

"That was it," she says. "I found that photography allowed me whole new levels of representation and abstraction, combined, that I couldn't express through other media." She started taking photography classes, to familiarize herself with the technology that she views as "just another tool to solve a creative problem."

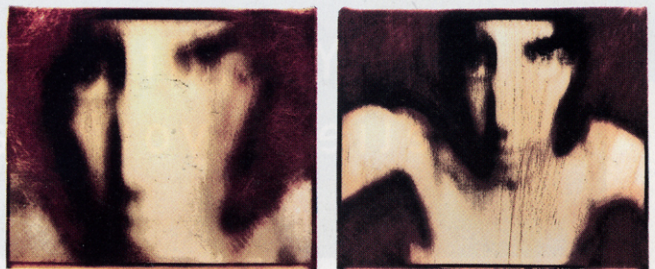
Eschewing the commercial, Astman makes art ultimately for herself. "But I also want a response," she says. Since the early 1970s, she has exhibited internationally in dozens of galleries and shows (currently, she is represented by the Jane Corkin Gallery in Toronto). "I'm hoping my work offers an entry into a different experience, whether emotional or conceptual. That's all I ask."

# Barbara Astman

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Astman, who arrived at photography through fine art and design, explains, "I've never been afraid of mixing media and don't feel I have to stay in one artistic world." At the Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Craftsman, she studied silversmithing and design. Later, at the Ontario College of Art and Design (where she currently teaches part time), her major in sculpture included drawing and painting courses.

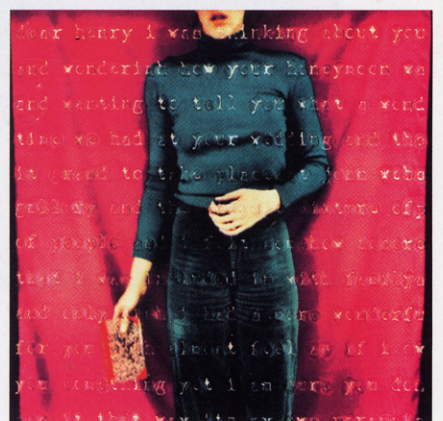
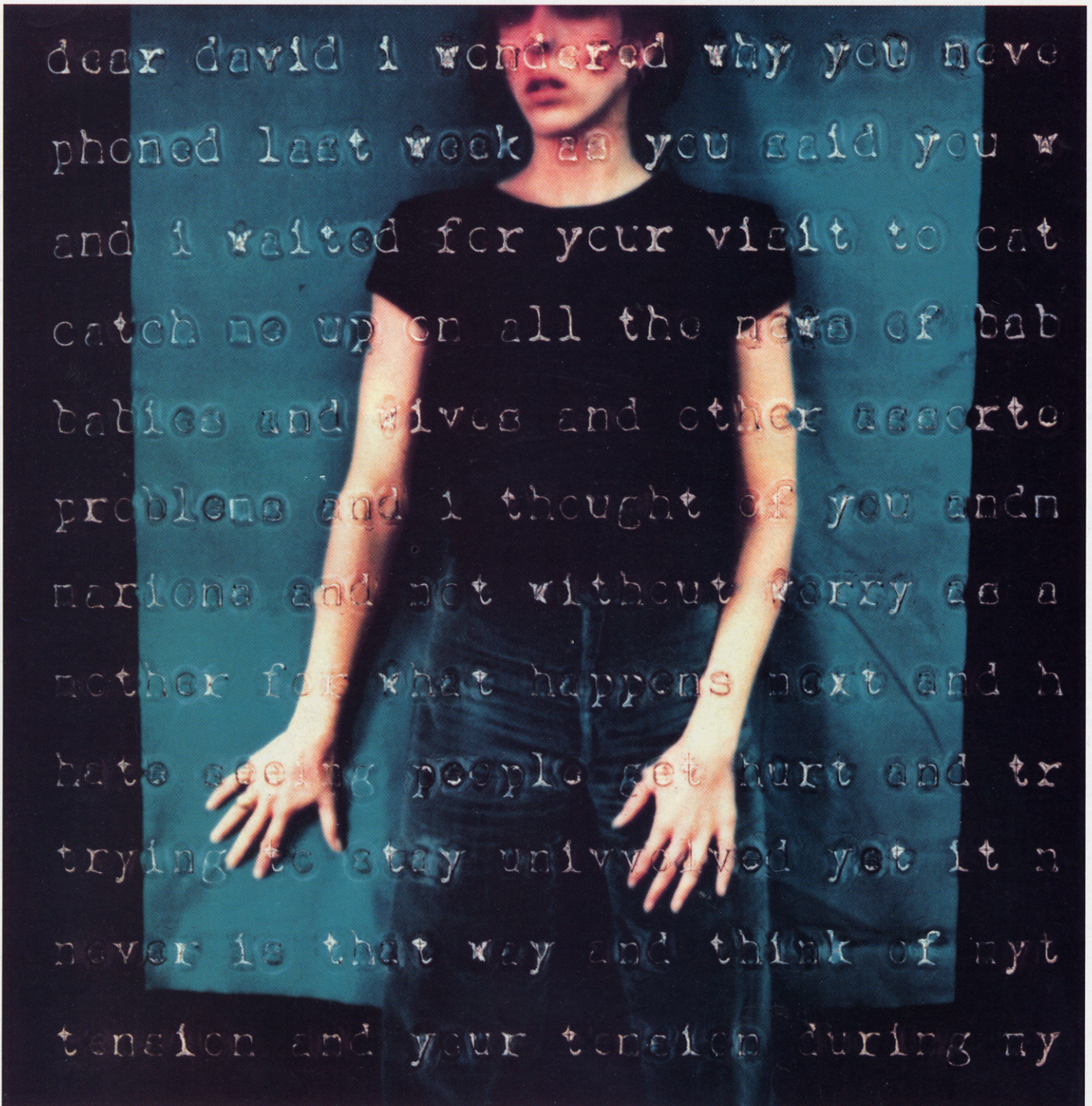
It was 1972, the year before she graduated. After shooting one of her sculptures, Astman used up the borrowed camera's remaining film on self-portraits—developing and printing the images with a friend's help.



Photographs ©Barbara Astman

What begins as personal ideas, "generated by living my life as fully as possible," become public, bypassing the autobiographical, she says, "because I don't think people should care about my life that much. My experiences are often quite universal, and I attempt to communicate that through my work. In the end, however, I'm aiming for a visual result."

In her most recent work, Astman achieves this with manipulated Spectra Polaroid shots of people or photos (found or taken by Astman). After the image develops, she peels apart the film, then brushes, scratches, and washes the back of the acetate surface, removing any unwanted information. Following that, she layers several of the now-translucent photos together, each one

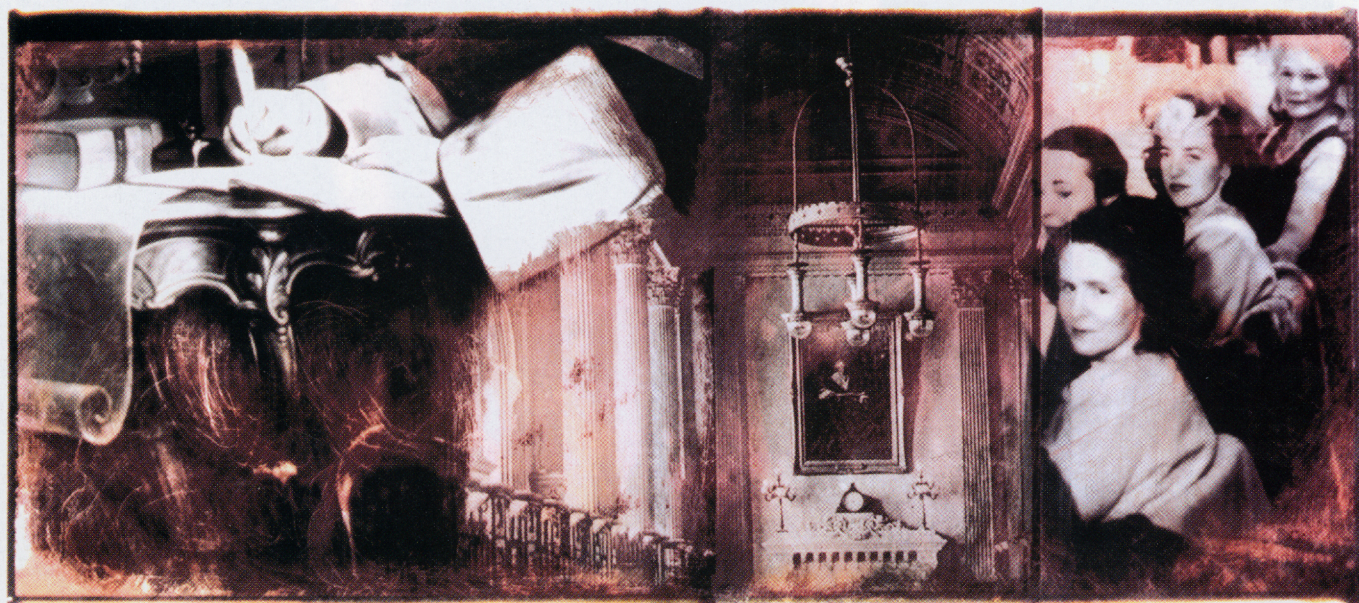


Left-page images from the series Scenes from a Movie for One. Above images: from the series I Was Thinking About You...

informing the other through color, content, and texture. Next, she creates an image from the stacked Polaroids. Depending on the medium for the final photo, Astman chooses between three processes: a traditional 4-by-5-inch copy negative; a digital image scanned directly from the Polaroids; and/or a 4-by-5-inch negative from the scanned images. Only the scanned go directly to Photoshop for mere cleanup; negatives head for the darkroom. Finally, her Epson printer (that and the scanner were generously donated by Epson, in exchange for her role as product endorser and tester) generates 200-year-rated archival prints. "I'm interested in the idea of breaking down and layering, because

rarely does one shot answer it for me," says Astman. "Life is complex, and this plays out in my art." She also enjoys the physical engagement of the process. "My mind and body working together through my hands helps me think through the idea."

The concept of mutual acknowledgment, and Astman's own need for contact and connection in an anonymous world, inspired her "Seeing and Being Seen" series (1994-95). Each of the 10 pairs of mismatched human eyes (from different



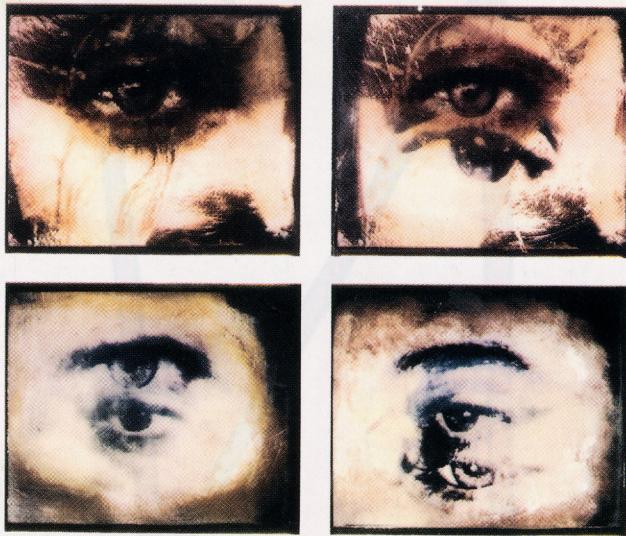
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Still Life with Teapot

sources) gazes out from 3-by-6-foot frosted Mylar. "I wanted it to be confrontational, but not about confronting," she says. Astman's "Scenes from a Movie for One" series (1997) was prompted by her attraction to private performance and self-portraiture, evident in much of her work. Finding her arm's-length, color Polaroids of herself too realistic, she abstracted them by photographing and rephotographing them. In the darkroom, from 35mm color negatives of reshot Polaroids, she created 20-by-24-inch prints, on Ektacolor paper.

"It's important to me that this series began as self-portraits, but it doesn't matter that, unlike my earlier work, viewers don't recognize me," she says. It also doesn't matter that Astman hid "a lot of angst" behind the blurred and abstracted sensual human forms that evoke an undefined physical and emotional sensibility. Imagining these photos as movie stills, she created her



From the series *Seeing and Being Seen*.

"Thirty-two Frames from Scenes from a Movie for One" (1998). As a group, Astman color-photocopied, to size, the Polaroid stacks onto heat-transfer paper. Then she cut them all out and arranged them into different-sized grids ("trying hard not to be too organized"), and individually hand-ironed each image onto large sheets of drawing paper. As you read the work, a rhythm is created.

Ideas aren't the only impetus for Astman's work. Sometimes it's her curiosity of pure visual possibilities ("What happens if I place this image on top of that one?"), the pictures her Leica Minilux collects at her whim, or magazine photos. Or, maybe it's archival photos, like the one of the 1946 Women's Law Association of Toronto dinner party that she found while doing research for a potential commission that formed the basis for her "Emergence" series (1999).

Astman collaged her scratched and layered Polaroids of the women with similarly produced, interior shots of Osgoode Hall. Because all the paintings inside Toronto's old courthouse are of male judges, except that of the queen, she had the photos outputted onto 3-by-6-foot canvas, "to put the women back into the building with the same power as the men."

Other images, like those from a box of 700 postcards Astman bought in France last summer, promise to eventually find their way into her work, continually challenged by her concern to keep it fresh and alive. "I'm driven to break out of my comfort zone, by allowing myself plenty of intellectual and technical freedom," she says. "Life is already filled with parameters and restrictions. I consciously try to keep those out of the studio so I can continually explore new ideas." ■

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ABOUT THE WRITER

**Claire Sykes is a freelance writer based out of Canada who has written for PDN, Studio Photography and Design, and Applied Arts.**