

Foundwork



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.

Interview by Mika Harding

Artist Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. utilizes photography and sculpture to visualize intimacy, communion, and joy. In his practice, Brown creates an ambiguous multiplicity that exemplifies the narrative tensions found between openness, agency, discretion, and imposed identity. Keenly aware of the responsibilities that come with photographing others, Brown sidesteps the didactic nature of the portrait by capturing the surreal or imaginative elements in his everyday life.

Following his recent solo exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in September 2019, Brown's work was included in *On Refusal: Representation & Resistance in Contemporary American Art*, curated by Clare Gormley at the MAC Belfast, Northern Ireland, on view through January 19, 2020. He also spent the past year as an Artist-in-Residence at St. Roch Community Church in New Orleans, Louisiana. Brown is a 2019 recipient of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Grant and was also shortlisted for the inaugural [Foundwork Artist Prize](#). I met with him on a rainy November afternoon to discuss privacy, the influence of Deborah Willis, and using images as material.

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Mika Harding (MH): When did you start taking photographs?

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. (EJB): My first use of a camera was as a young person trying to catalogue randomness, things at the mall, family members, and eventually making a pretty wealthy archive of my friends. I didn't really understand how photography could be used or how photography could be a career. At that time I wanted to be an actor and a psychologist, but then someone told me what a fashion photographer was and I immediately began to focus on making photographs.

Then I wanted to prove to myself that I could creatively use the camera. When I applied to NYU, a part of the application asked us to take photographs of what home is and I realized "home is me." So I started making self-portraits and that was a way for me to articulate the emotional grievances I was moving through. It was also a way for me to perform for the camera and see where I was at.

Once I got into college, a professor of mine wanted me to think about what it was that I wanted to say or lend my voice to because fashion will ultimately make use of that. Even when it's a focus on shape or a focus on certain details, it supersedes the clothes and there is another element that bolsters a fashion image. Once he told me that I lost interest in fashion photography and I wanted to just focus on photographing my life.

The first project I did was about gender and non-binaryness, around how a person could express themselves across their gender and how they could exist outside of a binaried system. So I made a photograph of a mannequin giving birth. The second semester project was a faux documentary called "The Ramble." The images were very general: very general romance, very general discovery, but they laid the seeds for things that I am interested in now.

MH: So the transition from photographing yourself to photographing others happened while you were still in school?

EJB: Yes it did. I took a year off between sophomore and junior year and that year I made the most significant growths in the portfolio as far as the self-portraits were concerned. Then my junior year I took a light class and also began to show myself how I could narrate as well, while still using self-portraiture, but I was now involving other people in the images. At that time I was curious about interracial power dynamics as they were expressed in desire and then I realized that I really didn't care. It was not what I wanted to do and I wasn't feeling sad anymore—the self-portraits were born out of a sadness of being gay and not feeling very comfortable in that space. By that time the comfort is there. I was at a point where I didn't think it was necessary to see myself in that way, I needed to take another route, so I stopped making self-portraits.

The first time that I came out of myself to photograph others was a commission for BUTT Magazine. I chose this very strange prompt that encouraged me to photograph these other people whose lives I was just beginning to know. As I was making those images, I felt so responsible to the people in the photographs and I felt that because this is my work, it was possible for me to speak for them, but I was feeling uncomfortable with a direct kind of portraiture and I had to figure something else out.

MH: That is a continuing theme throughout your work: the problems of portraying or respecting agency and privacy in a voyeuristic medium. How do you deal with that?

EJB: Now that I am no longer 20 years old, the responsibility that comes with representing another person doesn't frighten me as much. I also don't think about it as a finite representation, even if the photographs that I make now are often of people in ambiguous compositions or

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presented in ways that are fairly indirect. There are images like *An underline through dried cement*, which is a frontal photograph. My concerns are still around safely navigating photography and not overstepping my bounds, my concern is still privacy. I am just not interested in being as discretionary as I have been in the past with the images—feeling like I can't show a person's face. What I gravitate towards now is the presence of an act or the presence of an action.

I think it was a direct result of going to school, making self-portraits and people not having any other way to enter the work outside of "Oh Elliott, you look really pretty in this image." Prettiness wasn't what I was after and that created this adversity to beauty, not wanting to focus on it at all in the images, but I have a different relationship to beauty now.

I also wanted to get people to pay less attention to faces, because the interiority can be in contrast to what the face is suggesting. The imaginative space that a photograph can provoke about what is happening in an image can be troublesome, but I think that trouble is just inherent to being a human. You have to make assumptions, rather, your mind is going to use context clues to guide you for what you think is being expressed. I am still asking for people to do the same thing in the images that don't show a face. I am asking them to use the details of the image to guide them through it. Articulate the forms, articulate the details of the image, and that will place you where I'm at or where I am trying to go with the image. Hiding a person's face or using anonymity in a powerful way doesn't have to be my only tool.

MH: That ties in directly with issues of projected readings in your work. You'll have a person with their back turned in an image and people will project their biases or their own narratives about representations of black people. I know that is something that you have been concerned about or struggled with.

EJB: The work that I make lends itself to be interpreted in so many directions. Even as certain folks' interpretations can be alarming and eye opening to where they're at and how they understand black artists in the moment that we currently exist in. What I am focusing on in the work is an intra-communal space and that was a big interest when I decided that I wanted to make work about other people. I wanted to show how blackness was defined intra-communally. There's tons of difference to be found, not everybody is joyous or not everybody comes from the same black experience.

Right now there is a lot of emphasis of the specifics of where an individual comes from. My experience as a black person from New York, raised in Long Island in the suburbs, but in a Southern tradition via my grandparents is very different from the folks in New Orleans who have had a different relationship to land, a different relationship to freedom, a different relationship to pride than anything that I have ever cultivated having grown up on Long Island. Even as we have likenesses, there is still an encouragement to be specific about where you are from and what kind of clashes and congealing results from that. That is what I am interested in when I make things.

MH: Representing that multiplicity is a very rich subject matter. You've pointed out to me the importance of the work of Deborah Willis and the idea that an invisible past is a diminished one. The collecting of incredibly varied narratives and the importance of that work as a way to reexamine and re-contextualize the past. Do you see yourself fitting into that arc?

EJB: Yes, Deb comes to mind for several reasons. Going to NYU and being in the photo department, I felt immediately at home and safe because of her presence. I felt like there was a space for me and that I was protected. Even at the times where my work was evolving in a way that she wasn't quite aware of, her concern for beauty, how she uses beauty as an organizing

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tool—thinking cross culturally, what are peoples ideas of beauty and how can a quest for beauty be used as a unifying measure or make you privy to what people care about, which for Deb goes beyond physical appearance or embellishment. That sits with me often.

The other thing that moves me about Deb's work is the amount that she's done to re-contextualize and reexamine or simply provide gravity to images that have been discarded or been left with little interest. This idea of fictionalizing the past or contextualizing the past as a way to indicate the present is really moving to what it is that I do and understanding what the role of fiction is in self-determination. Deb has pioneered that space.

I wouldn't say that her work often has been spoken about in terms of fiction. I think that is the trick of photography, when you lean into a definitive space around it. None of it is definitive, it really has as many legs as reading something over and over and realizing one detail more about it as you continue with it. The picture is constantly animated.

MH: How do you choose what to photograph?

EJB: The greatest commonality is an attention to how something falls into place within a space. I tend to like images or compositions where things are collapsing or details are tripping over one another, just thinking of the layers of sight and the layers of reach in a photograph often grabs me.

I'm also interested in warmth and how ever that can be expressed. Often I'll make photographs of friends or people that I'm in the process of getting to know and those people will usually be someone that I have experienced some degree of warmth with. Another word for that is simply intimacy, but I think that the warmth is an important thing to focus on because it connects the work back to my personal life. That has always been the goal—to see warmth. I gravitate towards it and want to contextualize it in an image. Those are the principle ways that guide my focus as an image maker.

MH: Intimacy is very clear in your photographs. In a photo like *Oftentimes*, justice for black people takes the form of forgiveness, allowing them space to reclaim their bodies from wrongs made against them., which is from a memorial service you photographed. You didn't know the people there beforehand. Was taking that photograph a different experience for you?

EJB: Absolutely. When that person asked me, I wanted to know if there was anyway for me to be with the family somehow or get to know them a bit before. I didn't want to disturb their mourning. They don't know me and I didn't want to just show up. My presence there was facilitated by someone that I was able to get close to immediately. She was so welcoming. It was definitely rooted in developing an intimacy of some sort with these folks. That's still very important.

MH: That's an great skill for a photographer to be so able and so fluid with gaining the trust of other people. Taking someone's photograph is so intimate.

EJB: I really try to not put myself in those situations. Having to get to know somebody on the spot doesn't always work and some people won't reveal themselves or develop an ease with your presence. The discomfort is more on the logistical side of things and not with the family. Getting together on the occasion of death is a very tricky thing to do, it's difficult thing to be a part of and make photographs of.

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MH: Over the past couple years you've gone from taking photographs, to incorporating sculptural elements into those photographs, to making stand alone sculpture. Can you talk about that transition?

EJB: In the first work that I exhibited at Smack Mellon in DUMBO, I printed the image onto canvas and I was obsessed with that material because of the texture that it gave and it made the image like an object. Fundamentally, I am very curious about objects and having a tangible, physical experience with a work. Objects accomplish that pretty straightforwardly. Then I framed the image in bloodied and stained t-shirts. The frame was another way for me to double down on what the work was doing. From the very beginning of my exhibition history, I've been thinking about how to make something more of what the photograph is already doing. The photograph is already this incredible labor and then trying to be even more laborious with the context that the image is presented in. I am just oriented in that way.

Earlier I mentioned something about constantly animating the image and that's been a word that keeps coming up when I talk or write about my work recently. There is something about objects that feels animated, it feels like it's still going, it's touching you in a way. Even though for the most part, a lot of the objects I interact with are fairly static. Objects have this emphatic, static animated quality to them that I really enjoy and want to work with.

MH: It serves as an important mirroring device. For example, in Sssummmmmwhhhhhhhhhhere, there is cropped image in a lightbox, which you further obscure by putting objects that jut out into the viewers space making them move in order to see. That speaks directly to your choices to obscure your subjects and your use of cropping.

EJB: A lot of the structural things that I have made further break down the image. There is the other work, He gave and he gave / but he wouldn't have given at all if I didn't let him in, / if I didn't cover my body in soap three times, / swish oil between my teeth 47 minutes ahead of the time / that I expected him / (Wounded) with frame cut outs. It is still about collaging the photograph in addition to providing some distance between the photograph and the viewer. Increasing that distance but also lessening it depending on who you are and how you might be moved by what you are seeing.

In the stand alone sculpture, I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound (Six Stations), I wanted to make something that worked with photography in a more discrete way. There is a frame that is trapped within a bedpost in that sculpture and the two images that's in the 99 cent holder, I wanted to reference the way photographs occupy that space. Photos on top of each other, bent, scratchy. I just printed them at Staples and put them in the holder because I wanted to have that history there. I wanted to honor that way in which I've seen images perform. Both the carpet and the interior of the jewel case are cyanotyped so there is the suggestion of an image or the fact that something is present in these objects that is not outwardly or easily communicated. That relates back to what I have been doing with the images, there is something that has been happening here that is not incredibly legible. Working with that space of potential, while really privileging interiority of a thing and the right for things to withhold. That's what I am looking at when I am looking at objects, their interiority, the feeling of something being called beyond what is visible.

The sculptures are a way for me to further privatize the scenes. They are about layering and collaging, and adding another component to it for the sake of placing you elsewhere. The titles are doing the same things that the sculptures are doing to the images, when they are in a direct relationship with an image.

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MH: That's why I find your work so poetic, the way that your photographs operate as distillations of different moments. The addition of your titling adds another beautiful layer to something that maybe isn't so obvious. How are you titling your works?

EJB: I consider the structures that I want to make for the photographs or for their own purpose and think about the service of a thing or the form and poetically presenting that back. Language is incredibly important in terms of the work that I make. Often when folks who don't have very much experience with art, what I will encourage them to do is to articulate the form or what the gestures are. Just say them out loud to yourself and you will find the poetry of it. Once you find the poetry of it, at that point you can make it yours, make it meaningful or not for yourself.

The titles will often come from observations that I've made separate from making the photograph. I am constantly writing down or describing my environment. Trying to be as specific as possible in describing a feeling, things that are passing, that I see on the bus or train: moments. I'll write and then when I am relooking at the photographs and thinking about how I want them to operate in the public space, a detail will call out to me that more often than not will call out to something that I have already written. I enjoy the cyclical process that is not necessarily about me trying to formulate something new or specific to the photograph.

MH: It's a matching process? You've already seen what you're seeing and you bring it together?

EJB: Right, in a way, it's like I've already seen that detail presented in a different way. The image in the doctor's office called Fat holds itself up for once, thoughts hold themselves up for once, I think that title was called to mind because of the stain in the center and just seeing how that grease, that fat is suspended above these other things and the body has found its way to divorce itself or found a way to exist parallel to these other interior happenings.

MH: That photo is an interesting entry point to discuss your use of presence and absence—a way to portray the effect that people have on their environment.

EJB: Logistically, because I am photographing black people all the time and they make up a lot of visible space in the work, the impetus to make a photograph that does not have a person in it is a way to get at a different color palate. A lot of the images are deeply rooted in brown. That image is a way to get out of brown, out of wood paneled floors, wood paneled walls, brown skin, so I gave myself a challenge to photograph something that is absent of an individual. I wanted the focus to be on that stain. The presence is still there, the person is still there, but now it's about these objects and the blue that's back there.

MH: It's also interesting that it's your stain because you don't photograph yourself anymore. Of course, you're always in the photo, because you're the one taking it, but it functions as a way to connect your body back into the worlds you're created.

EJB: All of the possessions in the photo are also mine. I just really love clinics, how sterile they are, the overarching lights there. The lighting I use looks very similar to the even toned lighting that is in the clinic. I try to avoid those clinics where the light is a little too blue and doesn't have enough yellow in it.

MH: In Syllables of Joy and Devastation (2), your darkest photo, the woman is almost blending into the background. The manipulation of light gives it this resonance; she becomes a beauty archetype or a sphinx like character.

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EJB: A friend commented on how bright my images were and how I don't really handle shadow. I think in the year or two following that statement, I was very conscience of how shadow was represented. When I made that image of Camille, I turned the lights off and it was just the gesture that was present. Still you see the arm, her languid feeling, she looks not very well rested, you see these gleams of gold coming out from her rings on both hands, the white T-shirt that is briefly visible and then her eyes—the distance that they insisted on having. I was caught up in her gesture, the fog of that detail.

MH: So what's next for you? What are you working on now?

EJB: I haven't demonstrated myself as someone who uses images as a material and I think that's how I can continue to put myself forth. I want folks to think of my work as in process, to see the photographs as an element of the practice, not the only part. I need to make more of an effort in other mediums in order to really get my point across that photography is the material, not the final thing. Photographs are so sophisticated and so elegant, in the various ways that they can move throughout the world and different contexts and people are not privy to that labor because of the supposed ease of it.

MH: Because it's something that everyone can do?

EJB: Right, because everyone has access to some kind of imaging technology and can point out what they think is special to them about an image. People are naturally in a position to not regard the surrealist or imaginative element or tangible physical elements of a mounted photograph.

What's next is working more with photographs as a material. When I was in Texas recently, working towards a show that will be at the Knockdown Center next year, I was making images of weird landscapes, taking details shots of mushrooms in the grass, cows doing strange things. Images that I would never use as work, but I can use them as a material.

Also working more site-specific. I think it is fascinating to receive an opportunity to show, to think about the intention of the space in which I am showing in. I am so invested in bringing me into the space. I want to work within a space and reflect it outward.

MH: You spent the last year in New Orleans, having lived in New York your whole life, either on Long Island growing up or in the city for school and after. What was that change in geography like? How did it influence your work?

EJB: In the show at Nicelle Beauchene, the works that were in New Orleans were all shot outside of the home. Two of them take place in a bar space, another takes place at the clinic, the other two take place in a persons backyard. Because a lot of the friends that I had in New Orleans have a relationship to being imaged that really insists on their privacy, I wasn't making photographs of these people in the house. Being a newcomer to New Orleans encouraged me to be outside a lot. Also I didn't want to see elements that I was used to in my photographs. There isn't grass anywhere in my previous work, so I made the photograph in the pool. I got that pool from someone down the block. I knocked on their door after having seen it in their backyard while I was passing and asked to borrow it. Same thing with the bar. I went to there and a friend connected me with the bartender and he let me use the space while no one else was in there. There was no hassle, I asked, saying that I wanted to make this image here, I am doing this residency over here, and they all said "Sure, what time?" In New Orleans I had less access in some ways, less permission rather to image certain folks, but I had more access in terms of the kind of spaces that I could be photographing in. Whereas, that freedom for me in New York has mostly existed within folk's homes, not so much in public environments.

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MH: You appear to be moving towards more scene building, as opposed to capturing “natural interactions.” Is that a direction you plan to explore more?

EJB: Yes, by the time I got to New Orleans, I was ready to be orchestrating the image more often. That lent itself to doing so within these venues that I had to ask a different kind of permission to use them, as opposed to already being in the house with a friend, having my camera and the lights set up and going for it. Because I am planning more, it put me in a position to actually realize the ideas beyond what I have immediate access to.

MH: I recently read a quote about you with a line that said that your work functions to prompt people to think not about what they are seeing but how they're seeing. I thought that was a nice way of describing a lot of the devices you're using. How do you hope people approach your work? Or is that not relevant to you?

EJB: It's incredibly relevant...that quote was by a person who is a friend of mine and a photographer, poet, musician and he gets it. That person understands the history of photography, how folks interact with photography based on its history as a document. Or it's history as something that is meant to tell you x, y and z. Instead of my images communicating facts of a moment, the people in the image, or the facts of the space itself, you're instead being asked to have a different relationship to what is in the photograph that is not based on a comprehensive, irrefutable truth. The questions of what am I looking at really doesn't have much bearing in terms of me filling out the remainder of the frame with this alternative of considering how you look, or how we look.

This question of “how” always gets me, because I don't think of my work as educational. I think the word how is often directed at white people, how do we change how they see us or how they interact with a thing. I don't make the work as that, I make it because I am indebted to a medium that is visually tantalizing and really satisfying to me, but I am also indebted to these lives and not exploiting them or doing wrong by them. Then again, sometimes the privacy has acted to push people away. I've realized that privacy can be shared.