

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

*raw
and
radical
women* 
*in
the
arts
podcast* 



A Conversation with Jessica Backhaus part 1 & 2

Celebrated and award-winning contemporary photographer Jessica Backhaus is on the show as the first guest of the season to talk about her artistic journey from being a child brought up around Art, to her photography studies, mentorship with Gisele Freund, first assignments, and her current work as one of the most highly regarded contemporary photographers in Germany. She shares valuable insights and meditations on her career and being a woman in her field of work

About our guest

Jessica Backhaus is a German-American contemporary photographer that grew up in an artistic family. She studied photography in Paris where she spent many years and met Gisele Freund in 1992, who became her mentor. She pursued photography in New York, doing her own projects and assisting photographers. She has ten publications under her name and her photographs appear in numerous important art collections.

Jessica Backhaus has had a long career. So in this packed double-episode, we untangle the several aspects of Jessica's life, roots, career, and passion.

In Part 1, she talks about her childhood and novice experiences as a photographer: from being a student in Paris, to getting under the mentorship of iconic Gisèle Freund, her first professional assignments, moving to New York, and being a woman in a field of work that held strong stigma against women at the time Jessica started working.

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Conversation Highlights

Part 1:

- Jessica's upbringing: art, freedom and opportunities to explore and develop her passion
- Gisèle Freund, Jessica's mentor
- A woman's meditations and insights on a 20 year old photography career

Part 2:

- From the first project to the first publishing representation
- The process of creation, beautiful accidents and "Cut Outs"

Episode part 1

Jessica's upbringing: art, freedom and opportunities to explore and develop her passion

Jessica's parents were deep in the theater world when she was born. "From a very young age, they showed me their passion for their art form, the theater," she says. Jessica tells us all about how this childhood that was immersed in art, always touring and meeting a multitude of artists, has led to the inevitable evolution towards a life devoted to a passionate artistic pursuit. In her case, photography. She says "there was a lot of freedom and creative expression, because we had singers coming into the house, artists, painters, it was an open house for just creativity."

When her mother moved to Berlin in her teenage years and had a new partner that gave Jessica access to archives, she tells us she would plaster stills of movies on the walls of her room. "I have always been obsessed with imagery, and with visuals. I think in between these two world experiences and upbringing, that profound desire to become a photographer and to work with visuals was born."

After Berlin, Jessica went to boarding school at 16 and felt enriched and enthralled by all the different cultures in her class. "It was just in a way the most beautiful education you can get because it opens your horizons from a very young age," she says. "You learn about differences, you learn about tolerance." At 18 she started studying photography in Paris where she spent several years.

"I'm very grateful for the education that I got," Jessica says, "because it really taught me what it means to be independent, and really follow your own dream or convictions and just try things out, experiment, see what it is that you love, and then just go for it. Don't wait. Go for it."

Gisèle Freund, Jessica's mentor

Jessica Backhaus knows she's been very fortunate to have had an intimate relationship with her mentor, Gisele Freund, an iconic German-born French photojournalist. While she was studying photography in Paris she came upon

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Gisele's biography. "You know, sometimes when you're a student, you have these fantasies," she says, "and you have these dreams, and you think, oh if one day I could meet her how wonderful that would be."

She tells us the fascinating story of their encounter at an event in 1992, and how a simple introduction and a first invitation for tea from Gisele, as she gave her card to Jessica, led to a profound and long lasting friendship.

"A friend of mine said, listen there's this talk, and it has to do with copyright. And there will be lots of different photographers," Jessica recounts. "(...) I thought, that sounds wonderful! So I went and there were a lot of photographers from the Magnum agency. And literally, my heart stopped when I saw that Gisele Freund will be there."

Jessica approached Gisele while she was giving an interview and as a flock of people surrounded her. "There are certain moments in life when you just know," she continues, "if you really want to meet her, you have to approach her now or never. Otherwise, this opportunity is passing by you". Jessica describes this as "kind of a true miracle", and that after a first visit, "developed a beautiful friendship that lasted for eight years."

Gisèle Freund also had, of course, something to say about being a woman in this field of work. Jessica relays this: "She also said, it's not going to be easy for you, being a woman, even though things have changed and are slowly moving in a different direction. But she said: Really, try to always stay true to yourself and follow your own personal convictions and don't make too many compromises."

Jessica concludes beautifully by saying that this friendship with Gisele Freund was "one of the most beautiful gifts (she)'s gotten in (her) life so far."

"It was very special," Jessica says. "She was and still is a big inspiration in my life."

A woman's meditations and insights on a 20 year old photography career

Being a woman in photography nearly 30 years ago

When Jessica finished studying photography she was only 22 and she felt like she knew "nothing about photography." She says: "I was naive, I wanted to live just by my photographs. But of course, nobody could care less and my phone was not ringing and I had no work." She was confused as to where and how she would specialize in photography. "I had no clue," she continues, "I was just obsessed about photography."

To add some context, Jessica tells us that the professional landscape in this field didn't easily accommodate women in France. She exemplifies this by relating an anecdote of one of her first jobs as an assistant to a successful fashion photographer thanks to an agent that was representing him. On the first day of work back then, Jessica says: "I will always remember that he told me, excuse my language now, but he said: 'What the fuck is she doing here? She's a woman. I don't want a woman on my set to be an assistant, you can send her home. I need a man.'"

The agent insisted she stay, and this experience eventually led to apologies from the said photographer, and acknowledgement of Jessica's extreme passion and dedication towards her work. This was followed by an invitation to

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move to New York upon which, if accepted on the requirement that she'd need to be independent and look for other jobs, he'd have a few assignments for her.

The landscape for women in New York was different and more accommodating. "In New York," she declares, "they were already much ahead of their time. Because being a woman didn't matter once in these five years, and there was a real network of people helping each other."

From commercial photography to artistic photography

Jessica reflects on 20 years of a tumultuous career. She navigates the intricacies of making a career out of photography, especially when veering away from the commercial side, which she quickly realized she didn't enjoy. Despite the hardship it would present, she decided to go stray away from commercial work to go seeking representation of her own art:

"I realized I don't like to do this commercial work," Jessica recalls, "I can't really do what I really want to do. And I didn't like it. And I thought, what am I gonna do? Really, and that's when I understood, what I really want to do within the photography world is trying to do exhibitions and publish books. But of course, I realized that this is not an easy pass. Because yes, you don't have a guarantee, you don't have a stable income, and you live a little bit on the edge. But I realized I'm going to pay the price for that, because that's really what I wanted. I wanted to be free, and just do my work."

Radical dedication leading to a flourishing career

'Dedication' can be overused and seem a pale word when employed to describe utter perseverance to the point of just "eating salad and potatoes", as Jessica puts it wonderfully when describing what happened after she's made the decision to focus solely on her own photography as a means to make a living — "When I made the conscious decision of just dedicating myself to doing my own personal projects and hoping to make a book and hoping to find gallery representation," she says, "it gave me a lot of clarity because I was very radical in a way. (...) I quit everything. I tried to get rid of all the extra noise and all the distraction even if it means, it sounds like a cliché, but even if it means I have to eat salad and potatoes, I'm going to eat salad and potatoes but I just want to do what I want to do."

Making a full-time living as an artist is an endeavor that's eventually abandoned by many, for the pursuit is seen as difficult. Jessica comments on this by sharing her views that it doesn't necessarily get easier despite more recognition. "You can never really have a moment where you think – I've made it," she says.

When asked about her vision to make women in art and photography more visible, Jessica tells us that more women need to be in the various positions that the art world holds. "I've seen that in the last few years that more and more women have positions in important places, being a chief curator, or being the director of a museum," Jessica explains. "So because that is changing, that is already a good first step."

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Episode part 2

In the second part of our conversation with photographer Jessica Backhaus, we delve into the nitty gritty of Jessica's work: her process, her distinct style, and the evolution of these.

From the first project to the first publishing representation

Jessica Backhaus tells us about the first personal project that she worked on when she was 30 years old. "So I decided not to go down that road of commercial assignments," she explains, "I really wanted to develop my own personal projects and see how far I can go. And if that allows me to make a living."

Jessica's first project involved photos of still lifes and interiors of homes in rural Poland, as her mother and step-father owned a farmhouse there. This environment struck her as intriguing because of its contrast with her life in New York. She would try to involve the villagers whose homes she took pictures of by giving them the photos she'd have printed in New York. "They had never seen their home in this kind of way," Jessica says. Within the next four years, Jessica worked within the whole region, as more and more people found out about her project. She then added portraits in the project because she "couldn't imagine not having the people also in the project."

"In a way, it was a very important project," she continues, "like all first projects for any kind of creative person when you create something for the first time that is meaningful and valuable to you." Her hope was to find a publisher to get this project into a book, which she then met at the Frankfurt Book Fair. She describes this process as "quite an undertaking": making a list of 50 publishers she was interested in, and she managed to see 48 of those. "I felt that my life was dependent on hopefully finding a publisher because I realized that if it doesn't work, I'd have to quit photography. And I didn't want to quit photography."

Jessica Backhaus found a publisher that gave her complete freedom. "I had a collector's edition with Polish porcelain and sugar and spoon, and even on the regular edition, we could wrap the whole book in a Polish tablecloth made out of plastic."

It was a successful endeavor: "All of a sudden, I started being approached by galleries and collections. And I realized that I was able to make a living just with that work," Jessica says. "Jesus and the Cherries was maybe the work that was the most documentarian, photojournalistic where I did a lot of portraits, and I have never done portraits ever since."

The process of creation, beautiful accidents and Cut Outs

Jessica tells us about her style of work and how it evolved: "As I saw, I never did any mis-en-scène, I really just created the composition. And then, later on, I guess, seven years ago, when I started working on a project called Six Degrees of Freedom (...), I imposed a rule for myself: I said I never want to touch anything. I just want to capture it as I see it. But then I thought, I think I want to break my own rule and want to be more loose and see what happens if I create a still life on my own."

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Jessica navigates her work as a wave, creating rules and breaking them, evolving from portraits to still life, touching and not touching the elements of the photograph. She tells us about her numerous failures, and that “failures were a step forward”, and that moments of failure are even “pure magic because (...) you develop your own relationships and your own critical point of view towards your own work.”

Cut Outs

We continue this conversation with Jessica as she relates to us yet another fascinating story about the prediction of Jean-Christophe Ammann, who used to be the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt and others in Switzerland: “I remember one conversation,” Jessica begins “And he says: ‘Maybe you’re not going to believe what I’m telling you now. But I can see there will come a time in your life when you will end up in complete abstraction. And I looked at him and I couldn’t really understand. And he says, I can see in your images that there’s a profound longing for abstraction. And it’s just a matter of time, and you will end up in abstraction.’”

Jessica’s most recent project *Cut Outs* is exactly in abstraction. She says they are abstract yet “very concrete”. She got fascinated by collage, even though she would have never guessed it, years prior, as she was creating radically different work. Jessica comments on the nature of change in creative work: “If you would have told me one day I want to experiment with collage, I would have said ‘Never in the world!’ I could not imagine that. The beauty that we change, we change our perspective, we as human beings, we change and I think it’s wonderful to embrace these changes, I think it’s really one of the most beautiful things we can do.”

She comments on the interesting nature of collage: “It’s so different from the pure act of taking a photograph. With a collage, whatever you put together (if it’s photographs, papers, tape...), whatever material you want to put in your collage, there’s this fine line of adding too much or too little,” Jessica says. “It’s so interesting how it’s a different process.”

She tells us about *Cut Outs* from its origins, to how they evolved to create the final result: the interplay between cut outs and heat, the shadows and the light created by the pieces she connected, and that the whole project was a result of “happy accidents”.

Color has always been an essential element in Jessica Backhaus’ work, her own life, and for *Cut Outs* specifically: “I dived in this color world for three years, when I worked on these cutouts. There were days I could feel in my energy that it was going something to me physically, emotionally, and it is something that I really embrace.”

Another aspect of *Cut Outs* that Jessica shares with us is the book creation process. She relates a “beautiful book production” while working closely with the book designer. They’d settled for dark pages to make the cutouts shine: “We decided to have the whole book in these dark untrusted pages and just have the cut outs glow. It really worked,” Jessica tells us. “And I thought this is like being in a theater, or in a class, or in a movie, everything around you is dark and you just have the screen or the stage. And I thought this is it, the whole book was immersive.”

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“I loved that it was new territory,” Jessica says about Cut Outs, “trying something else, see if it works. And I think that you have to push yourself, you have to experiment. And maybe it works. And maybe it doesn’t. But I really think you’ve got to follow your intuition and instinct.”

Jessica Backhaus’ process and work history are revealing of what it takes to live off and for your art. It embraces changes, failure, and experimentation. And she has final words of wisdom that beautifully end Part 2 of our double episode:

“You really have to pay attention to your work, and you have to be fiercely dedicated. You have to be disciplined, you really have to make it a priority, and really go deep, go beyond and really work hard. And then the next step, you want to find people that are beautiful, I mean, in an ideal world, that they are good, beautiful human beings, and they’re very professional. So that combination. It is possible.”

For the full article and episodes, please visit: <https://www.rawradical.com/Jessica-Backhaus>.