



Barbara Cole A Constant Evolution



written Emma Segrest

Barbara Cole has always been at ease in the water. As a young girl, she remembers the excitement of swim day at school. While the other children fretted over wet hair and a cold pool, Cole was eager to get in the water and let the feeling of weightlessness take over. In high school, she was a member of the swim team. In her early adult years, plagued by migraines, her doctor turned her back to swimming as a way to manage her symptoms.

For Cole, the water has always been a source of freedom, a place to release the restraints of the world above and allow for instinct and flow to take over. Instinct is a key part of Cole’s photography process; each image is a carefully crafted narrative led by careful contemplation and composition. Cole’s instinct has allowed her to create an expansive career as a pioneering photographer.

At age 69, Cole is continuing to push the boundaries of her artistry and find ways to keep revolutionizing herself. From surreal underwater portraits to experimental wet collodion techniques, Cole challenges herself to keep the work fresh and invigorating.

“You have to allow yourself to change. It’s so easy to stay in your sweet spot and not let yourself evolve because that’s what people like,” says Cole. “If you do change, evolve, and make something new, you hope you keep your audience because they’re also wanting to see something new.”

Cole did not start as a photographer. Originally, she worked as a fashion magazine writer and editor. During her time there, she became more hands-on in the photography side of the industry. Getting to stage the models and create a visual narrative awakened a new passion for her.

“I never really thought about photography as a profession or something I’d have to learn. I honestly just said yes and started working,” says Cole.

The Toronto-based photographer began shooting in the ‘80s with Polaroid film. She experimented with form and color in her early work as a jumping point for understanding the vision and mechanics behind capturing the single-frame stories she sought to tell. When Polaroid went bankrupt in the ‘90s, she knew she needed to have her first major evolution. It was at this time she began to experiment with underwater photography.

Cole is perhaps best known for her underwater works, but these stem from her overreaching desire to create ethereal imagery. Hazy, weightless, images of models suspended in the soft blue waves of the water have become a creative signature of hers. Though Cole says she was never good at drawing, her photos often resemble Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Evoking a sense of wonder and dreaminess, Cole creates fantasies, whether beneath the surface of the water or above.

“I find that often life is very loud, and I appreciate that sort of soft film that comes over you when you’re in the water,” says Cole. “You might hear that murmur of a conversation, but it’s not anything that you can distinguish clearly, you’re able to relax.”

While the final images of her underwater work are visually effortless, on the technical side, Cole is carefully monitoring each step of the design process to create that final romantic image. Everything from fabric choice to makeup application is done to help Cole and the models get into the zone.



Cole creates a dynamic sense of movement from a still image, which is a crucial aspect of the visual interest in her work. The intentional layering of setting, costuming, and staging begins to sound more like a theatrical performance than a photo. And that’s exactly what she wants. Cole treats her process like a ballet or a stage performance, as a communication technique between herself, her vision, and the rest of the crew working to capture the image.

A downside of underwater photography is that it is mostly only feasible for about five to six months due to Canadian weather. The other six months are spent retouching photos and working in her studio. But this process can become isolating.

“I love shooting. I don’t like the retouching part. There’s always a part of somebody’s job they don’t care for,” says Cole. “I find I’m not a very social person when I’m retouching. I’ll feel like I haven’t talked to someone for days. I don’t like that.”

To combat this stagnant period, Barbara Cole began experimenting with a photography technique known as wet collodion. Dating back to 1850, this historical film-developing technique allows photographers to essentially make their film. It’s a labor-intensive process that requires the film developer to become a novice chemist. Cole has had the unfortunate luck of having her preferred film discontinued.

Not just once but multiple times. The frustration of having to start over with a new film and learn the ins and outs was a big reason she leaned into wet collodion. The draw of wet collodion for her was being able to create her own film.

Learning the historic technique was not enough, however, as she wanted to take it a step further and tailor the technique to her vision. Normally, wet collodion film develops in sepia tones. But color is a crucial aspect of the visual language in Cole’s work. To add this element back into the wet collodion technique, Cole has created a “sandwiching” process.

This process involves taking two shots of the same image. One is done with wet collodion; she uses this image to capture the background. The second image is shot with Kodak film; this becomes the foreground of the image and features the subject of the piece. Cole then layers the images in Photoshop and tailors the saturation to her preference. It’s a high-detail process that results in a moody, mysterious image. Cole isn’t daunted by the hard work, for it’s a necessary step in following her instincts.

“If you knew how much time I took on an image for the payout, you would die laughing. I just do it because I need to, you know?” says Cole. “I get an idea that I visualize and I think, wouldn’t that be great if I could do it? That’s the only thing that matters to me.”

Barbara Cole

Chiaroscuro

from Figure Painting

Courtesy of the artist



Barbara Cole

Catalyst, Dispersion & Primer

from Figure Painting
Courtesy of the artist

Chasing her visions has led Cole to this point in her career, leaving a trail of romantic, fantastical pictures behind her. The culmination of her work thus far is showcased in a new book that captures the breadth of her multifaceted career. Titled *Between Worlds*, published by teNeues publishing house on June 28, 2023, Cole’s book takes readers through her artistic dreams and the realities of making them happen. Within the book are QR codes for readers to scan, leading to videos made by Cole that reveal the creative processes behind the photos seen on the pages.

This unique interactive element is Cole’s way of offering her hand through the pages and pulling the readers into the shoots with her. It creates a deeper sense of appreciation for the works and helps to ground these dreamy images into a layer of reality that is unexpected yet refreshing for viewers.

Subverting expectations lets Cole maintain her visual integrity and voice as an artist. To create is to have freedom, and Cole seeks this sense of freedom in all her endeavors. Though best known for her underwater photography, when asked what animal best represents her work Cole mentions a bird. To her, they are magical, beautiful, and free. The cohesive images throughout *Between Worlds* offer a beautiful and effortless feeling while flipping through the pages. Hidden beneath the artistry though was a nagging fear Cole had that she no longer was able to be inspired.

“I kept worrying that this was the end and I’m not going to be creative anymore,” says Cole. “That was a horrible thought.”

As soon as she finished the book, Cole found her spark again. The relief of wrapping up her projects created new room in her brain for ideas and inspiration. Though she is 69, she is not done creating and evolving yet.

Cole’s artistry continues to speak for itself. It shows a mastery of fine-tuning an individual’s creative goals to produce fresh and innovative work. Whether underwater or in her studio, Cole continues to question her methods and expectations. It’s this flexibility that keeps her work timeless and captivating. Cole is still seeking to learn from the world around her, through nature and other artists.

When thinking of a legacy, it’s not just the range of her artistry she hopes to be most remembered for. She hopes people remember her as kind and fair and that she inspires others to do something wonderful on their own. Her expansion of the medium is another way she has cemented an image for years to come. Barbara Cole has never been afraid to push the medium of photography forward. Her inventive thinking lets her create elements in the medium that are new and enticing.

Cole says that sometimes, while dreaming, she finds herself suspended underwater, looking up at the light filtering through. If you’re lucky, you may also find yourself floating through the worlds of her creative visions while asleep at night and dreaming.

