



## TINA BARNEY *taking time*

*Tina Barney's mind is razor sharp. With a career spanning 42 years and no sign of slowing down or stopping, Barney's tolerance for the uninteresting is zilch. She is led by her curiosity for the human form, how it occupies space, and the relationships and traditions within families. If she finds that she has exhausted a subject, she will not waste a minute on hesitating towards something new. As we started our interview, she steered me quickly towards the questions that interested her.*

**SABRINA WIRTH:** *I'm curious about your creative process: how do you find your subjects and think about what you want to photograph?*

**TINA BARNEY:** Oh, I can't believe you're asking this! How do I find my—? Well, what pictures are you talking about? *The Theater of Manners, The Europeans, the Small Towns, or Silver Summers?*

**SABRINA:** *How about The Europeans. How do you come up with themes within your work?*

**TINA:** It depends on what project you're talking about.

**SABRINA:** *Which is the one are you most interested in?*

**TINA:** Which one are you more interested in? You're the writer.

**SABRINA:** *Ahh... Let's talk about The Nudes.*

**TINA:** Yeah! Ok, let's talk about that. That project was very different because I was tired of photographing the same thing. I always wanted to photograph nudes, but I didn't know why. I was kind

of familiar with the NY Studio School of Drawing and Painting. And, deep down, love to draw and paint, so I started taking classes there. And I found out that I could hire models that the school was using to photograph from. I knew that I didn't want to photograph models in a very formal sense, as you would in a classical painting way. I decided I'd like to photograph in an interior. So I asked the models if I could photograph them where they lived, because I wanted a narrative. Most of them were taken in the models' apartments. I also decided that I wanted to photograph them in a 8x10 view camera. And the minute I started that, I was interested in real life. That's why artists at some point usually try to make art about the nude. I can't remember how long I did that project for, but it was for quite a few years, in the late 90s. I never did it again, but I made quite a few pictures. I've only published a couple of them, and there are hundreds of them. In *Theater of Manners* there are about three or four and that's it. So one day, I might hopefully do a book. But *The Nudes* are sort of separate; they're on their own. Just because people are nude, I didn't want them to be about sex, or anything erotic. I wanted them to be about the formal parts of putting a picture together. So that was that project and I never did it again.

**SABRINA:** *Why? Did you feel like you had just gotten that out of your system?*

**TINA:** Yeah, I did. You know, I do that a lot. Even though most of the projects I've done, which have been made into books, are - let's say - the *Theater of Manners* was 30 years, the *Europeans* EIGHT years, *Players* was a compilation of maybe 15 years, maybe more than that,

Small Towns was seven years. Every project I've done is many, many, many years. And *The Nudes* was one of the shortest. I went to China for only one month, and that project was that short. I usually know when I'm done, when it's over.

**SABRINA:** *Is that when you are not interested in continuing it any further?*

**TINA:** Yeah, I feel like I can't find anything new. Usually, you would think that after seven years you'd get tired. But I edit so strictly, that I can make 400 pictures and maybe ten I might like. That's why it takes me so long. Because every time I go out and shoot I might not get a picture that I like. So much of what I do is on chance. Most of them are found. Even though in the *Theater of Manners* or the *Europeans*, where someone's standing there and I made an appointment - I'm there, there's a lot of chance. I'm not going to always necessarily get everything I want.

**SABRINA:** *Would you say you're as much a curator as you are an artist?*

**TINA:** Do you mean an editor? I just think of whether the pictures are successful or good or not. I think most photographers come back and look at their results... Well, they might not actually. But I usually know right away and it's usually very, very few. If I get one good picture a year, I'm happy.

**SABRINA:** *So that goes into my earlier question, which was I guess difficult to express. Do you find the themes in your series after you have edited through your hundreds of photographs?*

**TINA:** No, first of all I don't usually think of it. Do I think of a theme? When I was doing *Theater of Manners*, I didn't know what I was doing. I knew there were specific rules: I was interested in family, I was interested in relationships, and the human figure in the context of an interior. So that was one set of rules there. Then, in the *Europeans*, I basically just wanted a different setting. I was tired of photographing at home. I was only going to go to one country. I didn't know it was going to take eight years. And then it started to get more interesting. Someone would say "Hey, I have a cousin in another country," and then slowly I would gather names in that country, see if I could find a place to live. It's a lot of production to do that. It was the first time I had to produce to that extent. This was before the Internet was invented, which made



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it doubly more difficult. So, there, the theme was – it's always people and in the context of an interior, and obviously they were European. And then *Players* was wanting to get away from a very formal, strict theme and look. I had done a lot of editorial work, starting back in 1993, and then fashion. Most people don't look at all those magazines and never knew those pictures existed. And I love them because they were different. And I wanted to make a book that – and then also I did a theater project, that was very short lived and hard to do, and hard to find people that would let me get on the stage and photograph them – has no theme. That's just about the pictures.

I know a designer called Chip Kidd, a wonderful designer who's very well known. And I asked him if he would do this book. I gave him a pile of these pictures, and I never told him what the pictures were, no titles. No source, nothing. I just said, "Play around with it," and that's how that book happened. And then the *Small Towns* came from – you know, I lived in Rhode Island in the summer and it's so wonderful to be able to just get in your car and photograph. It's always been something that I really liked. It's like being on a hunt or a chase. It's like going back to the origin of street photography. And what was different about this is I thought, "Why not try to record the town?" And it was the first time I really photographed strangers. I started thinking about a theme that has always run through my work, that has to do with tradition and ritual, the handing down of traditions from generations to generations, which leads back to the tie of family. I also started using the Internet for the first time. To search for parades, events, Renaissance fairs, civil war reenactments. That's how that *Small Towns* project happened.

Then I went to China because I'd been there last in 1983 and it was changing drastically because of all the new contemporary Chinese artists. I found a Chinese woman from France who could help me produce the whole project in a month. It was very hard to do, very hard to find. I was looking for age, tradition, and ritual, and in 2006 the old China was crumbling very fast. And I barely skimmed the surface of that. I don't think the work was well received, and I don't think people understood them either. I don't think there was enough time. It was the shortest project I've ever done. Even if I stayed there for five years, I don't think I would've even scratched the surface. There's a fine line of never really understanding. In all the other countries in Europe, I could speak all the languages except Ger-

man. It makes a huge difference. You can't even direct someone in a foreign language that you don't speak a single word of. That might have a lot to do with it.

**SABRINA:** *You've only created one series in black and white, how did that project start?*

**TINA:** I really was interested in seeing in black and white, and what that does compared to color, by itself, as a medium unto itself. And it really, really interests me and it always will. It's much harder to do than I thought, but I loved it. I don't think people liked them as much as I did. I loved them.

**SABRINA:** *What is it that interests you so much about black and white?*

**TINA:** It's like speaking another language. Or like learning another medium. It's like one day saying, "Gee, I think I'd like to learn to make a bronze sculpture." Just out of the blue trying to see in a different medium. It's basically another puzzle, a graphic, formal puzzle. I wasn't thinking of narrative. Of course the narrative is always there, it wasn't the foremost thing that piqued my curiosity. Just the tones and textures, the patterns, and the forms in black and white.

**SABRINA:** *Do you think you learned something new about photography that you didn't know before?*

**TINA:** Yeah, I definitely did. I started off with black and white, but that was so long ago, and there's more to learn. I think the thing about looking at black and white is that it's harder work. It's sort of like the nudes, "OK, I did that." I might go back to it again one day. I'd love to do moving film in black and white.

**SABRINA:** *Is that the next project?*

**TINA:** No, not in this lifetime. You know, I also just started using a digital camera, which is living hell for me. It's very hard. Speaking about learning a new language. Taking a long time to learn what the camera can do, what the technology can do, and then the translation of the camera onto paper. And that's taking a long time to figure out.

**SABRINA:** *Would you go back to working in analog?*

**TINA:** Well, this summer I did, because I was so insecure about the digital that I thought I'd go the polar opposite and I got out my 8x10 again. I got the



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film that now is so expensive that you can practically buy a car with it. It's \$190 for a box of 10 sheets! Can you believe that? There's something about the fact of it being film that changes the way you treat it. Anyway, that's materialistic. What I did love is going back to this cumbersome medium and the thinking process that takes so much concentration compared to the digital, where I just go clickety-click. I never really feel like I'm working hard when I'm using a digital camera. It doesn't feel like I'm making anything that complex. With an 8x10, it's very hard, intense work, and I love it. And the end result is so beautiful.

**SABRINA:** *How do you feel about Instagram?*

**TINA:** No.

**SABRINA:** *Would you ever use it?*

**TINA:** No. I cannot understand how people have time. If they're reading as much as I'd like to read, then I don't know where people get the time to do Facebook and Instagram, because I have enough to do in answering the emails I have to answer. I have absolutely no interest in that. And I would never take a photo with my iPhone. It has nothing to do with photography. Now, if I get pictures of my grandchildren, then I love it. But I would never take pictures of my food!

**SABRINA:** *What do you do to find inspiration? For example, what do you do when you come across writer's block, or artist's block? Do you get that sometimes?*

**TINA:** Writer's block is thinking of a new subject. I say that I don't do that, but I do. It usually just comes out of the blue. But at this point, after photographing for so long, believe me, it's not easy to think of something different. And I'm not going to go out to find a subject matter. For instance, the work I'm doing now with a digital camera, I don't even like talking about it, it's called "Athletic Rituals" and it's about sports. That sounds like a very stupid, superficial subject matter. But I thought about what I could get out of it. I started that last year. The reason these projects take so long is that for one year, I may have made two pictures that I like. Getting the shoots, the scouting, that takes time. And that happened all the way through with all the projects after *Theater of Manners*, since everyone was sitting in my home, after that the scouting is the thing that takes years. Granted, the Internet has expedited everything. The research is what really takes time.