SESSION 19 · UNIT 2 — LIGHT & PERSON · Feb 02, 2027

Alexey Brodovitch & Lois Greenfield

Brodovitch 1898–1971 · American, born Russia — Greenfield b. 1949 · American

Astonish me: designing motion, then capturing it in the air



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater · Lois Greenfield

"Astonish me."

— Alexey Brodovitch's standing instruction to his students

KEY WORKS

- Harper's Bazaar art direction, 1934–1958 — radical page layouts that treated design itself as a form of motion (Brodovitch)
- Ballet, 1945 — his own photographs of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, deliberately blurred and cropped to convey movement rather than record it (Brodovitch)
- Airborne, 1998 — signature mid-air dance photographs, the moment of maximum extension caught entirely in-camera, no post-production (Greenfield)
- Breaking Bounds, 1992 — black-and-white dance photography built on her years shooting for the Village Voice (Greenfield)

CONTEXT

Brodovitch was not primarily a photographer — he was the legendary art director of Harper's Bazaar for nearly a quarter-century, and his greater influence on dance and movement photography came through the photographers he discovered, trained, and pushed with his famous instruction to "astonish me." But he was also a photographer himself: his own book Ballet (1945) blurred and cropped dancers mid-motion, treating the photograph as a record of movement rather than a frozen pose. Lois Greenfield descends directly from that idea, just taken further: her dancers are photographed at the exact peak of a jump, fully in the air, with no visible means of support, and no digital assistance — the astonishment is real, made once, in a single frame.

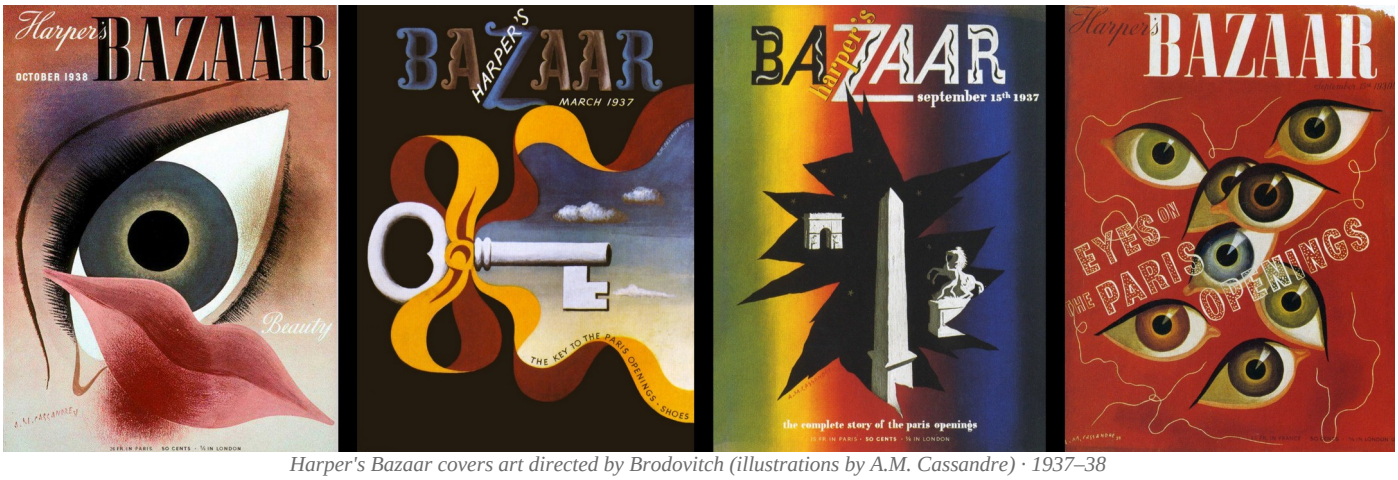
WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

The Ailey residency puts students in a room with a moving dancer for the first time — exactly the problem Brodovitch handed generations of photographers and the problem Greenfield has spent her career solving. Brodovitch trained and pushed the photographers who first figured out how to make movement itself the subject; Greenfield's practice is the clearest living answer to what he was asking for.

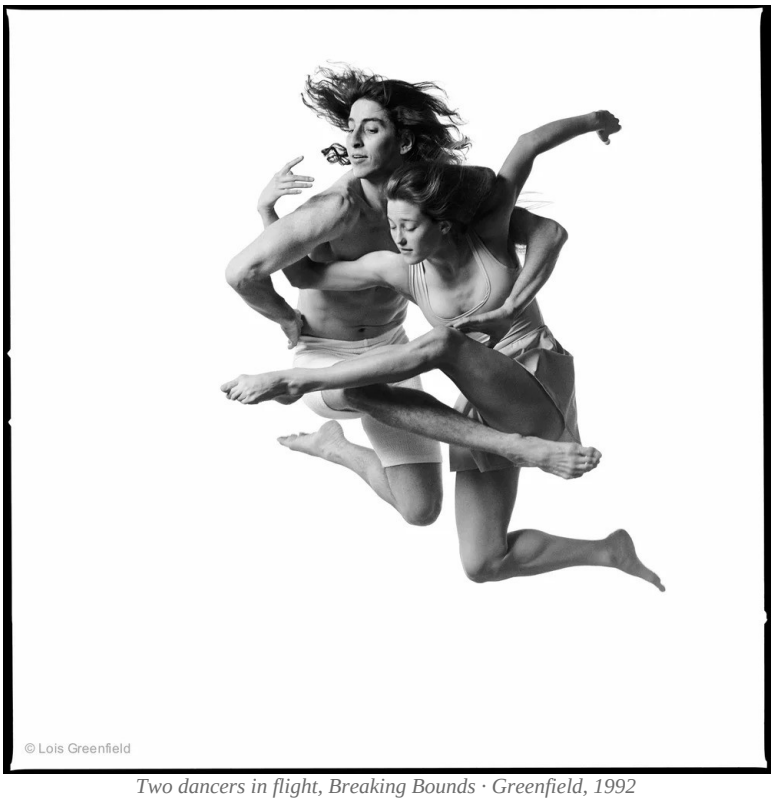
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Greenfield captures her dancers at the exact peak of the jump, in-camera, with no digital compositing. During today's residency, how will you know the peak moment is happening in time to press the shutter?
2. Brodovitch's instruction to his students was simply “astonish me” — no technical brief, no formula. Is that useful instruction, or is it too vague to actually help you make a better photograph today?

MORE IMAGES



Harper's Bazaar covers art directed by Brodovitch (illustrations by A.M. Cassandre) · 1937–38



Two dancers in flight, Breaking Bounds · Greenfield, 1992



Airborne · Greenfield, 1998



Dancer in flight (color study) · Greenfield