

Throughout my work I have been primarily interested in the suggestive possibilities between the images, and the open narrative I can create by juxtaposing the interior and exterior world beside each other. Portraits next to landscape, for example, and the tension between these two environments.

Whilst there are reoccurring motifs and symbols that appear throughout, the importance is on mood, metaphor and emotion, and how different subjects can both carry these feelings and somehow come together, creating my own ambiguous black and white world - similar in a way to the surrealist 1920's film noir.

Birds are frequent symbols that appear throughout the work. Inspired by mythology, they assume a variety of roles. They have been symbols of power and freedom throughout the ages, and are seen to link the human world to the divine. Silhouetted birds in the cloudscape, brooding vistas, faces emerging from darkness, all come together in an attempt to produce an imaginative and mysterious landscape.

Early visual influences for me have been Caravaggio and Francis Bacon, beginning with a general attraction to the darker sensibilities of each artists work and it's sometimes macabre nature. The use of stark, direct lighting and heavy shadows in Caravaggio's pieces, as well Bacon's apparent painted 'blur' have both made their technical influences.

My process involves a mixture of my own digital and analogue photographs and video, as well as found imagery. Through image layering, collage and surface scratching and inscription, I try evoke a dream like detachment of an earlier age.

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### **1000 Years Beside Myself**

When gazing at Ben Ali Ong's photographs one is transported to another land and time. The surface of the black and white images appear scratched and marked with age. The location, as in place, is uncertain however a narrative is engendered like auteur art cinema. The landscapes suggest old paintings. These depict sky, trees and water in a moody and romantic way leaving a residue of yearning. There is a pervasive sense of poetry.

Then there are nudes. The body of a beautiful woman is arched, perhaps with pleasure. The nudes are juxtaposed with the dreamy landscapes. There is an image of a magnificent striped eagle with its wings outstretched in flight. This image is overpowering when placed amongst

the others. What does the bird symbolize in Ben Ali Ong's mise en scene? The bird is in flight or landing. Is he an angel of life or death? In many cultures, especially the Middle East, birds have symbolized the transition to death from life. When juxtaposed with the woman's body the image of the eagle raises other questions. Is he threatening her life? Are life and sex inextricably linked to death? *1000 Years Beside Myself* suggests all these profound complexities.

Ben Ali Ong cites Caravaggio and Francis Bacon as painterly influences. When it comes to photography I have to be reminded of Bill Henson. His Iranian heritage immediately suggests the great poets Omar Kayyam and Rumi who were masters of the word and who, especially Rumi, still hold huge influence in western culture. These photographs reflect the Persian cultural tradition in their search for the divine. Without words *1000 Years Beside Myself*, like Ali Ong's previous series *Ballads of the Dead and Dreaming* and *Songs for Sorrow* speaks powerfully to and of the spirit.

I will let Rumi have the final say;

*"Thirst drove me down to the water where I drank the moon's reflection".*

*"We come spinning out of nothingness, scattering stars like dust".*

*"Everyone is so afraid of death, but the real Sufis just laugh: nothing tyrannises their hearts. What strikes the oyster shell does not damage the pearl".*

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**Ben Ali Ong**

Some artist's work has the capacity to take you places that most never can, transporting you to allegorical destinations using poetry as its fuel. Ben Ali Ong's imagery circumvents those stubborn inadequacies of the often clumsy language we utter, crafting vocabularies to address the sublime. There are no words to convey certain feelings with any real precision; certain frames of mind, the way the heart feels when it beats in sullen empathy or despair; those moments that have no materiality in real world though they animate the mind. To pin these elusive things down, to still them for our scrutiny, the camera must be an instrument not just a tool; to evoke and not simply record. Ben blends portraits and landscapes, layering textures of history against the uncertain possibilities the future presents, bringing about the genesis of a

**remarkably convincing new world. He anticipates those collective anxieties that haunt us all in this age of spiritual abandonment - culpability for the atrocities of the past, life's frailty, love's ultimate futility, the finality of death. He orchestrates these frighteningly beautiful images to confront the terrifying question we'd all rather deny, "What does the world hold for us when it's deserted by the divine".**

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