

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways "Step Up" competition in 2004, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Step Up" was juried by Joe Amrhein, Owner/Director of Pierogi 2000, Artist Ellen Driscoll, and Tumelo Mosaka, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

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REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Let Go 5, C-Print, 20 x 24 inches, 2002 (detail)

# Jonathan Grassi



Let Go 9, C-Print, 20 x 24 inches, 2002

## Letting Go, Standing Still: Notes on Jonathan Grassi's Photographs

By Charles Hagen

Are the people in Jonathan Grassi's color photographs from the "Let Go" series falling, or have they thrown themselves toward the ground? Photographed at night on a grassy hillside, the subjects are frozen in midair, their positions untenable, just touching the ground and in the process of being pulled inexorably down. But did they trip? Were they pushed? Or did they choose to launch themselves forward, and if so, why?

In a purely practical sense, the answer is easy. Clues in the pictures suggest how they were made. The people, most of them apparently in their twenties, seem to be playing a variation on the familiar children's game of rolling down a hill. But even that reading is not as definite as it might be: these people aren't just rolling, they're hurling themselves forward in what might be awkward attempts at gymnastic moves. The nighttime setting suggests another angle to the narrative: maybe it's a party scene, out in back of the house, at the time of night when boredom and beer push people to do things they might never try otherwise.

But the power of the images comes not from the real-life story of how the pictures were made. Instead, the photos' interest comes from their metaphorical suggestions. Frozen in time and

Born: Norway, Maine—1980

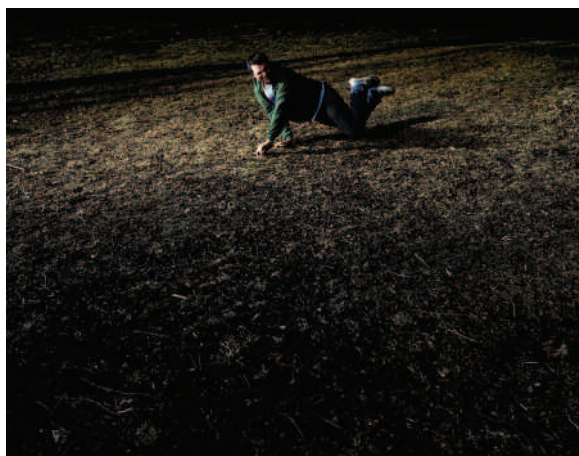
Jonathan Grassi lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. His photography captures and confronts vulnerability and the power that can come from embracing it. His work, while performative, holds a darkly humorous narrative.

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space, the figures remain forever hovering, like holy creatures, caught between falling and flying. Like dancers, they express emotional states, depending on whether their bodies are stretched out or bunched up, graceful or contorted.

It's a familiar trope, related to innumerable Baroque angels, not to mention Aaron Siskind's great "Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation" series, photos of boys jumping off a diving board at a Chicago swimming pool. Siskind cropped out all signs of the contingent world from his stark, black-and-white photographs, leaving the youths framed against the sky, their bodies clenched or splayed in transcendence or agony. Grassi's figures, too, seem caught in a final state, though its nature is uncertain. Underscoring the dramatic nature of

Top image: Let Go 7, C-Print, 20 x 24 inches, 2002  
Bottom image: Let Go 2, C-Print, 20 x 24 inches, 2003



the moment, each figure appears in a lopsided pool of light, as if caught in a spotlight onstage.

The ambiguity Grassi captures in his photos stems from the medium itself. Photographs offer dense overloads of detail, recorded with the near magical spatial illusion of lens-based perspective. But as critics have recognized since the medium was first announced, the sense that the photograph might at any moment come to life, that a figure in it might speak or move, was contradicted by the images' implacable stillness. (The dream of living photographs remains—whether in Harry Potter's magic snapshots or Apple's video iPod.)

A whiff of deception, or at least the suspicion of it, hangs over two other famous examples in the family cluster of images that Grassi's shots belong to. One of the most famous images in photography is Robert Capa's "Death of a Loyalist Militiaman," 1936, of a combatant in the Spanish Civil War caught falling backwards, arms outstretched, a moment after he has been shot. Yet in recent years its veracity as an unvarnished document has been questioned. Was it staged?

Does it matter? The fact it points to is indisputable: soldiers were shot and killed in that conflict. Capa's photograph provides a particularly vivid illustration of that—almost too vivid, which is why people question its truthfulness. But the dispute itself points to the special status we give photography as a truth-teller.

Another related photograph, famous in its own way, turns out to have been explicitly and deliberately faked. In 1960 Yves Klein had the photographer Harry Shunk record him apparently hurling himself from a second-story window above a quiet street in Paris. But the photo, widely interpreted as an expression of an artist's radical if sometimes painful freedom, has turned out to be a montage. Does that diminish its power as a symbol of artistic choice?

Grassi's subsequent photographs, in the "Let Go II" series, are close-ups of people lying on the ground. Paired with the frozen figures in "Let Go," these can be read as images taken just after the bodies have landed. There's something pensive and sad about them. It's not hard to get caught up in the gracefulness of the poses, the elegance of the long lines of the clothing, necks, arms. But such a reading ignores the link Grassi makes to the earlier pictures, when the figures are still caught in their final agony.



Let Go 3, C-Print, 20 x 24 inches, 2004

Enumerating all these other images related by form and subject to Grassi's photos is in the end a way of trying to specify their own particular qualities. It's like tracing a family resemblance, or constructing a visual tag cloud of references, of the sort found on Flickr, the web photo-sharing site. The plethora of reference that surround Grassi's images suggests the richness of the tropes he is working with.

A final reference evoked by these charged, dark images brings Grassi's enigmatic work into wrenching juxtaposition with the dark moment America finds itself in today. The figures touching earth, caught in mid fall, recall the horrific images of people jumping off the World Trade Center towers on Sept. 11, 2001. One of those photos was printed on the front page of the

New York Daily News the next day. But photographs of those moments were quickly pulled from public view.

In yet another light, Grassi's photographs could be seen as playful, even goofy, with comically hyperactive subjects frozen in slapstick poses. But the darker references are the ones that remain, and resonate.

*Charles Hagen is a photographer and Associate Professor of Art at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, where he also coordinates the Graduate Program. He has written about art and photography for many publications, including the New York Times, Artforum, Aperture, and ArtNews. His book Mary Ellen Mark (Phaidon, 2001) will be reissued this year in an enlarged edition.*