



# DINA GOLDSTEIN

BY JENNY MONTGOMERY

## MERGING HUMOUR AND POP CULTURE TO MAKE A POINT

Vancouver-based pop-surrealist photographer Dina Goldstein creates images that provoke a response. Her series *Fallen Princesses*, *In the Dollhouse* and *Gods of Suburbia* have all caused a stir, both in the international public response and in the recognition and awards they have received. There is an exhibition of her newest work, *Modern Girl*, at the Galerie Virginie Barrou Planquart in Paris this October—and two other shows this fall in Venice, Brussels and South Korea. We were delighted when the busy artist took the time to speak with us about her work and career journey so far.

### THE PURSUIT

As a child Dina Goldstein dreamed of growing up to be a treasure hunter or a private detective; but as a young adult, she discovered she wanted to be a photographer. She told us, “It happened in the Sinai, Dahab—one of the most beautiful places on Earth! I brought a point-and-shoot and ended up taking pictures the whole trip. I was 19 and decided to study photography. By 23, I was working full time as a photojournalist.”

To prepare herself for this career, Goldstein took an enterprising approach to her studies at Langara College. She explained,

“Women like Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke White and Diane Arbus paved the way for all of us girls considering photography. They were the archetypes!”

“Back when I was in school in the early 90s, they did not have a photojournalism program, so I created my own by taking a variety of social science classes and a photography program at the same time.” She found inspiration in female photographers: “Remember women pioneered modern photography! Women like Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke White and Diane Arbus paved the way for all of us girls considering photography. They were the archetypes!”

Armed with a Nikon FE2 and the dream of becoming a *National*

*Geographic* or *Life* photographer, Goldstein spent her early 20s travelling to conflict zones. She worked in places like the West Bank and Gaza, but eventually she came to realize that the peripatetic lifestyle, solitude and danger inherent in war photography were not a good match for her.

Returning home to Vancouver, Goldstein transitioned to editorial portraiture, and the images she made in these years were published in many Canadian and international newspapers and magazines. “My twenties were about learning the basics and honing my skills as a photographer. I took whatever jobs were offered to me and experimented with various techniques and looks. I was fortunate to be amongst friends that were actors, musicians and artists that all needed images so I had lots to work with. This is also the time when I began creating mini-series and other personal works. In my thirties, I took on many editorial jobs and some advertising work, which kept me busy.” Though these projects were diverse, she did mainly portraits, calling her approach “photoanthropology.”

### A DISTILLED FOCUS

If you're thinking that it sounds like she had a lot of irons in the fire in her early-career years, you're



PHASE ONE P45+, 80 MM F/16, 1/16 S, ISO 200. © DNA GOLDSTEIN - DNA.GOLDSTEIN.COM

right. Goldstein confirmed that she worked non-stop in her 20s and early 30s. “Also,” Goldstein added, “I became a mother at 35 and then again at 40, and this was the beginning of the shift for me. After a five-year struggle with infertility, I finally got pregnant in 2005 with Jordan. I wanted to spend as much time with her as possible and began working only on the weekends shooting weddings and events. This went on for about a year and then I started taking on bigger jobs again. Some of my big ad jobs were picked up during this period.”

She continued, “Jordan inspired my first large-scale series, *Fallen Princesses*, which led me on a new path of creating work that

had purpose and defined me as an artist. After that, I got pregnant again in 2009 with Zoe. At that time I decided that my time was too valuable to spare for commercial work, and I became a full-time artist, concentrating on producing my own projects. I opened up XX Studio in Vancouver with a 20-year retrospective, and now it is home base for me and my crew. I completed *Gods of Suburbia*, my most ambitious work to date, in 2014 and have been traveling regularly for exhibitions and festivals.”

#### A THEATRICAL SCALE

At this stage of her career, Goldstein is dedicating more time and resources to achieving her artistic vision for each image.

“I am composing large-scale tableaux, which demands much production. There are many people who work on various jobs on set. Lots of items to collect and details to prepare, all before the shoot comes together,” she said. “My past series are comprised of 10 images, and this seems to be a common methodology for me. I think it makes for a good amount of art in a series.” When you stop to consider the degree of planning necessary for each of the 10 images with their actors, sets, costumes, props and crew, it becomes clear that these are massive artistic undertakings.

#### INCITING INCIDENTS

When her first-born daughter started getting interested in



PHASE ONE P45+, 80 MM F/16, 1/16 S, ISO 200. © DNA GOLDSTEIN - DNA.GOLDSTEIN.COM

princesses, Goldstein discovered them for the first time too. Since the artist was born in Israel and had immigrated to Canada later in her childhood, she hadn't been familiar with the Disney versions of these fairy tales. Around the same time that the princesses made their entrance, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. As Goldstein lived these antithetical situations concurrently, she began to imagine the princesses' lives beyond the “happily ever after” endings so essential to the Disney stories. What would happen if princesses had to face a life-threatening illness, deal with the responsibilities of raising children, or struggle with aging in a culture that glorifies youth?

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Over a two-year period, she transformed these thoughts into her first large-scale series, *Fallen Princesses*, which went viral online, leading to international exhibitions and wide-scale recognition.

Goldstein's next large-scale project was inspired by her daughters' interest in Barbie dolls. While watching the girls and their friends act out scenes with these iconic plastic dolls, Goldstein thought about gender roles, beauty standards and disillusionment. She decided to tell a sequential “story in ten frames of Barbie and Ken's marriage falling apart while Ken finds his authentic self and Barbie has a breakdown.” The artist

gathered a team for the project and photographed the series on a custom-designed life-sized, very pink Barbie-house-like set. The completed series, *In the Dollhouse*, went viral just as *Fallen Princesses* had.

Then, explained Goldstein, “In 2012 I won a residency from Arte Laguna to spend time in Mumbai. It was an amazing experience that inspired *Gods of Suburbia*.” With this project Goldstein wanted to explore how religion fits into contemporary culture. Using the visual lexicon of various world religions, she created images to question the materialism often found in today's religious cultures. Shot in different locations, Goldstein says it was



NIKON D2X, 17 MM, F14, 1/40 S, ISO 200. © DINA GOLDSTEIN - DINAGOLDSTEIN.COM

an “exhilarating and exhausting series to produce.” The set of *The Last Supper*, for example, was particularly large and involved. Built in ground zero of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, the poorest neighbourhood of Canada, this striking tableau features twelve disciples and a dog gathered around a table littered with beer cans and food, which, Goldstein mentioned, “somehow disappeared every so often.”

Diverging from her 10-piece pattern, this particular series has 11 images. When asked why, she answered, “*Gods of Suburbia* has 11 in total only because I shot an extra image just in case...and they all worked out, so I kept it.” Whether she uses 10 or 11, whatever she’s doing is working:

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*Gods of Suburbia* has made an international impact. Though the series is controversial due to the sensitive nature of attempting to create a conversation about religion, it’s been awarded and recognized, including being shortlisted in the 2016 Sony World Photography Awards.

Her most recent series, *Modern Girl*, examines immigration, Western identity, commercialism and the development of female independence through diptychs inspired by vintage Chinese “pin-up girl” advertisements. Goldstein shared, “I have continued to create new work while dealing with personal loss. My father unexpectedly passed away April 2015, this as I began casting my new series *Modern Girl*. It’s been a challenging two

years working through grief, but my work has always given me purpose and I take comfort in that. Today I am looking forward to many projects and exhibitions on the horizon. One of which is a commission from the Contemporary Jewish Museum of San Francisco. I will be creating a series of images based on Jewish fairy-tale characters from the book *Leaves From the Garden of Eden: One Hundred Classic Jewish Tales*. Also another tableau series taking a critical look at the U.S.A.”

#### LEANING IN

We asked Goldstein to describe a typical day, and she said, “During the week we get the kids off to school. Then I hit the gym before I end up at the studio. There is much work to attend to. Recently I have been working on



PHASE ONE PESH, 50 MM, F22, 1 S, ISO 100. © DINA GOLDSTEIN - DINAGOLDSTEIN.COM

my new series, *Modern Girl*, and have been shooting the portraits over the last couple of months. Also handling print sales and dealing with my galleries. Lots of emailing, making arrangements for future exhibitions and talks. Then back home to cook dinner for the family. I often have to work late, and my husband, Jonas, takes over. He is an excellent partner and the only reason that I can have a career

and be a mother at the same time! I’m also traveling a fair bit to Europe and the States. For me there is no ‘normal’ day. It’s whatever falls on my plate.”

She added, “I’m very fortunate to live in Vancouver, a budding metropolis with immense natural beauty. We have a wonderful community of friends and family. My life revolves around the East Side where we live, our kids

attend school, and my studio is minutes away. This seems to keep my life balanced and fulfilled.”

When asked about her experience as a woman in the industry, she said, “Being a female photographer has definitely worked to my advantage allowing me access and trust that would not have come so easily to a male counterpart. This may also be because I am generally very

## DINA GOLDSTEIN...

### ON CAMERAS

“Film or digital...it’s still magic!”

“I started out shooting all film until digital came into the picture. We did have our ways of combining images or collage. Everything was photographed first. I apply this same methodology to how I use Photoshop. It’s the best tool to help me define and bring a story to life. However I have never created something from nothing, everything is photographed traditionally on location and on sets.”

“My favourite camera is my Fuji GA 645 medium-format range finder, film. I take it with me when I travel and am always pleased with the particular look that I achieve with

this camera. I still have lots of medium-format film in my studio fridge.”

“My large-scale tableau series are photographed with my Hasselblad digital medium-format camera.”

### ON HER WORKFLOW

“I use Lightroom and Phocus.”

### ON CARRYING PHOTO GEAR

“I have many cases to transport my equipment. At home we use rolling bags. When I travel I like to have a good backpack with me.”



friendly and transparent when I shoot. I've always loved to travel and experience different cultures. On my residency in India, I spent much time in the 'slums' of Mumbai, a life-changing experience. I take a real interest in my subjects and ask many questions. When I was in Gaza and West Bank (late 90s), I felt safe. There was an unspoken understanding when it came to the press. The punishment was harsh for those harming foreigners and press. Now it's a free for all! I would not go back to the Middle East as a female freelancer and a Jew! And I commend all those women journalists out there!"

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seem to think that men can handle the pressure more...but I don't agree. Having worked with talented art directors on fun and progressive ads, I was able to collaborate without ego, which surely gets in the way of most male success! I may be generalizing, but this is my observation within the commercial photography industry," she added.

#### THE ART OF HUMOUR

When we asked Goldstein how she deals with criticism, she replied, "What criticism? Who criticized me? Tell me who! Now!" Then she said, "Humour is the only way!" Her instinct to turn to humour as a means of working through complicated emotions is at the centre of her art. Goldstein is brilliant at using a playful, seemingly light-hearted photo to delve into themes of identity, meaning, disappointment and loss.

What happens when the reality of adulthood doesn't live up to our youthful, idealistic expectations? How do we come to terms with life's imperfection? Who are we when the thing that defines us falls apart? By prodding us to consider Snow White with a passel of kids, Rapunzel undergoing chemotherapy, or Barbie chopping off her hair in despair, Goldstein lets us question our core identity and our own life's meaning with the safety net of humour. Her skill at doing this sets her work apart. At once accessible and challenging, Goldstein's art has found a sweet spot—like Shakespeare, the pop-culture artist of his day—by merging "low" and "high" through humour and complex themes. From the academic types who like to analyze themes in scholarly journals to those of us who lean toward the more informal "groundling" end of the spectrum, there's a little something for everyone. ■

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