

## Interview with Alice Attie

[Alice Attie](#) is an artist who works in many mediums: drawing, collage and, most often, photography. Through her work she captures some of life's most important moments, including the honesty of puberty and the vulnerability of major surgery. She also travels and captures the essence of countries she visits through the people she meets on the street.

Alice's work is captivating, frank and sometimes distressing because of her refusal to shy away from the unsettling realities of life. But there is also plenty that is uplifting here: in her collection 'Aleppo, Syria 2011' we see the close-knit family side of a country in conflict.

We talked about her work as a way to contemplate what is important, and her current works in progress.

**Many of your photograph collections from particular locations (eg: Harlem, Mexico) are portraits. Where do you find your subjects that encapsulate such a strong sense of place?**

My subjects are there, on the streets, always walking or situated in the very places where I find myself walking. My subjects are the community itself. They are what define the life of the streets.

**You often deal with major life events in your work, such as puberty (*Coming of Age*) and major surgery (*Incision*). How important to you is this combination of drama and daily life?**

The medical work, the photographs of surgery, was inspired by several experiences. Firstly, my father was a surgeon and when he died, quite suddenly, I wanted to see this world that he loved and was so devoted to.

Secondly, it occurred to me early on in this five-year project that this is an invisible world, a world that is visually taboo. I have always been interested in looking closely at those things in our lives that are common, in some sense, but are not easily looked at. Surgery is one of those practices from which we are visually exiled, but it is a world that I think is very beautiful, very suspended in time and fraught with compassion.

We are all implicated in the experience of medicine and care, either as patients or as the loved ones of patients. To contemplate that fact is to see ourselves as both fragile and resilient in very extraordinary and unique ways.

I often think that if I was able, courageous enough, I would be a war photographer. I would want to continue the tradition of bringing to photography the difficult worlds that we often find hard to look at but that, in some way, I feel we are obliged to see.

The *Coming of Age* project is a body of work done over fifteen years. It is really a looking into a time in life which I always felt was special in that it hides nothing. Children, at these threshold ages, are fiercely honest. It is that honesty and openness that I wanted to capture with these children, all of whom I found in the landscape, over summers, throughout New England.

**As well as photography, you also do collage and drawings. Do you prefer any of these mediums and, if so, why?**

My drawing and collage practices are, I suspect, part of a larger effort to understand the world in whatever creative ways I can. The drawings were initially an extension of my literary career, re-configuring texts on the page. Over time, I have come to love the tenuous distinction between writing and drawing; making a line, a letter, a cipher—these are magnificent gestures in and of themselves.

I am intrigued by the collage. I love the idea of places as pieces in combinations, forming or deforming a visual complexity. Collage, perhaps like poetry, is composed of a very honed part of what we otherwise may think of as a whole. I often investigate the fragment as a constitutive part of all that we do, think, make, and attempt to comprehend. The parts that compose collages are generous; they permit any number of configurations and there is no wrong or right to where they land in the final work.

**Your *Incision* collection features some rather graphic images of surgery. How did it come about that you were able to photograph such unusual subject matter?**

I was granted access, very generously, to the operating rooms of nine hospitals in New York City and the surrounding area. I am sure that my dad's great reputation had much to do with surgeons inviting me into their theaters. Then they always passed me on to other doctors they felt I needed to watch.

Another and perhaps more important piece was that—because the surgeon's art is one that few see or appreciate, or that is often thought to be grotesque or unbearable—I wanted to capture the many procedures in a more thoughtful light, less shocking, more contemplative. Yet the graphic nature of some of the images is part of their strength. I feel that looking at the graphic or the difficult is something we all might learn to do; it is a real and significant part of our world.

**What are your current works in progress?**

A series of collages, black construction paper on white, of figures inspired by the suffering in Syria. I was in Syria when the war broke out in 2011 (my ancestors are from Aleppo). I think of Syria, the children, the torture, every day. I make these works because they give me an opportunity to think about what I need to think about: war, in this case.

I am also working on a series of red ink drawings. They are abstract; they are about time and the need to take time; they are forms that gradually accrue in different densities and intensities.

Lastly, I am working on two photographic projects. One, a series of landscapes in black and white, shot with my father's old Rolliflex camera with 120 film. I love going into the landscape and I love the time it takes to shoot and assess film. The second project is called *Letters*: I am photographing, in close proximity to allow for soft focus, letters. I have saved the many letters I have received since my childhood—the copious correspondences. I am focusing on the beautiful object that is the letter itself.