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# Jack Spencer | BEYOND THE SURFACE



Nashville, Tennessee, photographer Jack Spencer (b. 1951, Kosciusko, Mississippi) has always had a passion for painting, which he continued to pursue even after he began taking photographs while a student at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana. It is hardly surprising, then, that the photographs for which he has become renowned reveal a painter’s sensibility, with rich tones, evocative lighting, and otherworldly colors taking us into the ambiguous realm between fact and fiction.

Early in his career Spencer absorbed the influences of Edward Steichen (1879–1973), a Pictorialist photographer whose images were often manipulated to look like soft-focused paintings, and Robert Frank (b. 1924), whose series *The Americans* documented the gritty aspects of everyday life with a sense of clarity and raw vitality. At the same time, he has been influenced by paintings in which artists conceive of imaginative narratives and by literature that tells stories of irony, pathos, loss, and redemption.

These influences come together in the sections of the exhibition titled **Portraits and Figures** and **Apparitions**, in which people are carefully posed, props added, and lighting adjusted to capture their beauty and convey the ambiguity of their identities. In these works, Spencer emphasizes the ephemeral nature of life as observed in African American subjects in his native Mississippi and in the masks and disguises adopted by people playing various roles in Mexican culture, particularly in relation to the Day of the Dead. He believes that all art is to some extent self-portraiture, so these narratives also reflect his own response to transitory psychological conditions.

Concealment and transformation are central themes in Spencer’s work. In the current series **Mythologies**, he expands upon the use of body paint that began with the Mexican images. Avoiding specific cultural references, Spencer improvisationally applies paint onto the skin of models, then photographs the figures holding provocative faux votive objects as if preparing to enact a ceremonial function in some unknown indigenous culture. With their expressionless faces, stately postures, and submerged identities, the models convey an aura of mystery and detachment from contemporary life. With the title, Spencer invites us to see these figures as embodiments of myths that are unfixed in time, cultural origin, and specific symbolic meaning.

While for Spencer the human figure is a potent symbol of transition, the landscape can also reflect the relationship between instability and permanence. After 9/11, he created the series **This Land**, adapting tropes of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American landscape painting, with its idealized beauty and faith in transcendence and national exceptionalism—into a twenty-first-century



reality in which these ideals seem on the verge of dissolution. This shift is completed in such works as ***Marsh 55*** (bottom right) and ***Low Tide*** (back cover), in which the environment is rendered as pure atmosphere, inviting viewers into the space of the indefinite sublime, a site of stirring beauty and profound uncertainty. In conjuring scenarios in which meaning is elusive and interpretation is open, Spencer conveys his belief that, “If time is a vast illusion...then everything is ephemeral and nothing here is eternal and all is probability.”<sup>1</sup>

**Mark Scala**, *chief curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts*

Note:  
1. E-mail to the author, March 14, 2013

### Selected Exhibitions:

Since the mid-1990s, Jack Spencer’s photographs have been included in group exhibitions in museums in the United States and abroad, including the Birmingham Museum of Art (Alabama); the Columbia Museum of Art (South Carolina); the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.; the Honolulu Museum of Art; Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga; Morris Museum of Art (Augusta, Georgia); the Museum of Modern Art, Frankfurt, Germany; and the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego. *Jack Spencer: Beyond the Surface* is the artist’s first major museum survey exhibition.

Spencer has had one-person exhibitions at numerous galleries around the country and abroad, including Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York; Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago; Cumberland Gallery, Nashville; Galeria Filon, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico; Image Gallery, Bologna, Italy; Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta; and Stephen Clark Gallery, Austin.

### Selected Collections:

Jack Spencer’s works are included in many public and private collections, including the Berkeley Museum of Art, Berkeley (California); Birmingham Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Morris Museum of Art; Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Sir Elton John Photographic Collection; Tennessee State Museum; Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson; Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville (South Carolina); Columbia Museum of Art, (South Carolina); and Emory University, Atlanta.

### Publications:

*Native Soil*, Louisiana State University Press, 1999  
*Jack Spencer*, 21st Editions, 2012  
*Jack Spencer: Beyond The Surface*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2013

**Image credits:**  
**Cover:** *Beach People 1*, 2000. Archival pigment print with oleopasto glaze; **Inside left:** *Travestito*, 2004. Archival pigment print; *Madam M (Tribe)*, 2012. Archival pigment print; *Light Vessel*, 2012. Archival pigment print; **Inside right:** *Four Silos*, 2007. Archival pigment print; *Dark Horse*, 2005. Archival pigment print; *Marsh 55*, 2005. Archival pigment print; **Back cover:** *Low Tide*, 2007. Archival pigment print. All photographs courtesy of the artist. © Jack Spencer

## Jack Spencer: Beyond the Surface

July 12–October 13, 2013

Upper-Level Galleries

This exhibition was organized by Mark Scala,  
chief curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

Presenting Sponsor:

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