



Scholars @ Silver Eye

Lily Bridges in conversation with artist
Bella Convertino

About the Artist

American photographer Isabella (Bella) Convertino (1998) was raised in up-state New York. She attended Wesleyan University, where she graduated in 2020. Her work has been included in exhibitions and internationally recognized by PHROOM, Kommunale Galerie Berlin, Pioneer Works, OD, i-D Italy, Antics Publications, among others.

Silver Eye Scholar and Carnegie Mellon University Senior Lily Bridges recently interviewed Bella Convertino about her photography. Bridges writes:

"I was initially attracted to Bella's photography as I was able to register notes of my own notions of growing up in small-town American culture. I felt a certain affinity with her active suspicion towards performance of gender and whiteness in these spaces and investigating what home and privacy mean through architectural, constructed, and cultural narrative. From growing up in a small town in upstate New York to where her practice continues to take her, this is a conversation with Bella Convertino on pressure, bursts of light, flailing, and photography."

Front Cover:
Untitled, 2020, from the series Colors



*Sunflowers, 2020,
from the series
to shoot the sun*

Lily Bridges: Who are you?

Bella Convertino: My first thought is: Bella, not Isabella (which I've chosen as my professional name for some reason). I've been working to reverse that lately (though I am stuck with my website address).

I was born in 1998 and was raised in New York, about an hour outside of New York City. Not Westchester County—Putnam County. In a very small town, heavily wooded, close to the river. I went to small but public schools and eventually to Wesleyan University, where I graduated in 2020. I thought I wanted to be an astronaut. Then an actress. Then an actress and an astronaut. Eventually a photographer.

LB: What camera do you use?

BC: I rotate between a few. *to shoot the sun* was made with a Hasselblad on loan from Wesleyan University, where I want to undergrad, and most of my colorwork has been done on a Mamiya RB67—a beast of a camera. I've recently switched to using lighter tools, such as the Fuji 645 and a basic 35mm camera. I don't normally rotate cameras like this, but lately, I've enjoyed it. It's just a gift to not have to drag a massive studio camera around with me out

in the world, especially since it draws so much attention. I'm a very shy and private photographer.

LB: Why do you think you are attracted to photographing the people and spaces you do? What is that impulse like for you? If you can point to one, what is a pivotal moment in your life that defined your relationship with photography today?

BC: I lived in an area separated and dispersed by thickets and woods— homes in this town were dispersed, separated and never united by any sort of central location, like a main street or town hall. Nothing of the sort that signifies traditional ideas of community. My driveway was a mile long... surrounded by woods. I felt stuck— but it forced me to be really imaginative. The “woods” is a ubiquitous descriptor... there was nothing visual to latch on to— my visual understanding of community was strange. I was always fascinated by trite ideas of what living in a community looked like and what filmic narratives had to say about coming-of-age—how it happens and where it unfolds. Of course, these depictions of community were white and cookie-cutter (I wasn't watching any radical cinema growing up), but they felt reinforced by stories told to me by my parents, who grew up in reminiscent neighborhoods. I became really interested in these hyperbolic expressions of community. Especially those depicted in 80's movies about white suburbia and kids on bikes with that autonomy to move from point A to point B. There is this character of freedom and mischievousness... but housed in this strange container of suburbia that is anti-all of that. This was the beginning of an early fascination with community architecture and its specific iteration in filmic narratives as defined by whiteness & heteronormativity. I'm interested in questioning it and in experimenting with its imagehood. How can it be made hyperbolic and exist as a lie and a truth at the same time?

At the time, I don't think I realized what I was watching on the screen was just a bunch of white boys running around and doing their thing because they could. I just sort of conflated the sensation with the setting and really, heavily craved to be living in that as a kid. Now, that fascination is a lot more self-aware— it's not like I am still wishing that I lived in one of those cookie-cutter Tim Burton neighborhoods, but there is definitely still an intense attraction/repulsion to it. I find myself wanting to live there just to be in the middle of the strangeness and to just exist at that point of observation.



*Untitled, 2019,
from the series
Colors*

Then, when I went to high school, I was in Cold Spring every day. It wasn't exactly suburban in the traditional sense, but still, it embodied that filmic narrative of small town-ness. I think I desired that sense that I was in a movie for some reason. My mom is an actress, so I grew up with this very literal exposure to film-making. So that has always played a predominant role in how I think about images and the ways in which I want to make images. There is an attempt to make something hyperbolic, or sublime, out of this... ordinary isn't exactly the right word... but, ordinary situation.

When I was making work in undergrad at Wesleyan University, I had it in my mind that I was going to make these really serious images because up until that point I was sort of terrified of talking to people and didn't want to be vulnerable like that. I was going to New York City all the time... I ended up making a lot of images that were much more in the realm of street photography. I think they were early efforts to just embody something aesthetically interesting.

to shoot the sun arose from these intense personal experiences from high school,

and even parts of college, of just being in these really traumatic adolescent relationships, that were, like, so messed up. There was a certain amount of trauma that I carried with me— it affected my relationship to my body and I felt this really overwhelming frustration with femininity in general. I just didn't want to be in ownership of this body, and the only way I knew how to cope with it was to completely divert my gaze onto the male body, and to start to investigate masculinity in spaces. Power, intimacy... I think a lot were the early stages of an investigation of these two main ideas of privilege. From there it became more complicated and more conceptually weighty, but it always came from this initial place of feeling so frustrated by ideas about gender performance. Then, I started to think more about gender performance in relation to whiteness... All of these things really came together in *to shoot the sun*.

A lot of it was also about imagehood. I always felt these pressures about imagehood growing up, especially being close to acting and film. Now it's ironic that I am in the business of making images because it was something that I always wanted to reject... this idea of being seen and consumed as an image. I think I got through it by making images of other things.

There is a constant worry that the images fail to subvert anything at all, and only perpetuate the things that they are imaging. I think that reality is present, I don't think that is really something I can negotiate. It is impossible to deny.

LB: I think it is a fine line, and I agree with you that I am not sure if it is exactly subverting but I see your images putting these ideas under this lens of suspicion... this active suspicion. It's more than shooting back or turning it around on itself; it is exposing its construction through your experiences.

BC: I think that's really accurate—yea, maybe it is not a conscious attempt to subvert as it is to just source something back to its origin. And I think for me, I house this idea that a lot of these things can be sourced back to the home, to private spaces. And how privilege gets constructed within private spaces, and then how it translates to the public sphere. I think that is what makes a suburban setting such an interesting case study for that. Privacy is emphasized. There is such a strange and specific kind of way that privacy and family life is played out actively in these immediate exterior places...



*Untitled, 2020,
from the series
Colors*

like the front yard, back yard, the street... and then how these are carried to the school, and so on. I think about these very small communities, these very concrete points that we process experience through and travel between. I am interested in this very literal and simplistic construction. I am thinking about adolescence and waking up, exiting the home, getting on the bus, going to school, coming back to the home— this triangular state of existence in which all these small dramas play out. There is something strange about that unrealistic— or, I don't know, it's not something that lasts past a certain point. It's almost stage-like in that sense, and that seemingly constructed way of moving through the world is really interesting to me, very odd.

LB: Is there something that you always take photographs of that never really makes it to the final cut? (for example, I will take a lot of images of cars but rarely use them in a final edit).

BC: I probably photograph too many houses because I'm an absolute sucker for them. I am obsessed with this nuclear, neo-colonial structure that embodies all of these things we've been talking about... the home, the family. Domestic space has always been really interesting for me, but for some reason, I don't make pictures inside. There are also many things that I long to photograph successfully, like interiors, but I seem to operate (as a director,

as a photographer) less successfully within. I'd like to reference privacy and interiority in my images but not enter directly into them. I love making pictures of the exteriors, the yards.

The black and white work was mostly taken in the immediate vicinity of my partner's home. It was literally just front yard, backyard— using these very, very limited spaces to attempt to play out or construct these vague situations that spoke to conflict. Especially gender conflict.

LB: What is the bigger picture you always keep in mind?

BC: I have to remind myself to think about conflict or unearth moments of conflict when I'm making images. It keeps me sharp.

This was hard for me to answer at first. I don't typically think about it in a heavily structured way— I feel like not a lot of us want to talk about it, but we are really just flailing through time and space and not really knowing what is happening, and then coming up with the language for it later. I do believe that processes are happening and you are making conscious decisions but I am not the best at being aware of those as they're happening.

But conflict is something that I really try to keep in mind. Because there is an interest in the sublime and the hyperbolic expression of imagehood, I sometimes get lost in that. I'll have times where I am just like this sucks, all of these are just way too romantic and they don't get at anything I am actually interested in getting at, because they are so caught up in that hyper-expression of an aesthetic. So, conflict is something that I always try to keep in mind. It's like I always have to remind myself to remain critical because sometimes it's hard to get lost between that flip-flop between being attracted to it and being repulsed by it. Sometimes I find myself trapped in either category and I need to remind myself to navigate it more nimbly I suppose.

LB: You have me thinking about this shift from your public, street photography practice to a more private and personal one while you are also reconciling between attraction and repulsion. What was that like?

BC: Originally, I was working more in more public spaces but my process was more private but I wasn't engaging with anyone. And then, it switched

and it was the inverse. I moved to the private sphere and had to interact with many more people– it became more of a public process. Asking people for images is very stressful. It's more enjoyable to work with friends and family in a collaborative way. That's really what happened with that project. I was leaving campus every weekend and going to my partner's house, about an hour away from where I lived. He lived in a much more cookie-cutter environment and it was fascinating to me. I would hear about his childhood and it was like the childhood I dreamed about as a kid. But that was complicated because it wasn't anything like a direct translation of what I thought it was going to be. There was internal family conflict in his home surrounding sickness. So, it was very strange when this all began to rise to the surface of what I presumed to be this sort of clean surface, where things happened how they were supposed to.

I had also spent a lot of time in the town before making pictures. I met him freshman year, and then the work didn't happen until junior year. So, there was a lot of time to process the relationships I was seeing unfold before me.

LB: What do bursts of light mean to you? What do they mean when you photograph them?

BC: Light simulates drama, and drama indicates that something has happened. Light is directive and can be manipulated to connote drama. Drama speaks to narrative, and narrative is elusive in the context of photography. I think that ties into the idea of alluding to something but being on the periphery and the way in which light is perhaps a tool that exemplifies that process. I often wonder if photographs document something that has happened, or something that is going to happen.

I feel like I have a very strict sense of visual congruence with light and how it interacts with form. It is really the impetus for why the picture is being made at that moment. And then, of course, hopefully the content is powerful enough to match where the image is sitting formally. So on a basic level, light is one of the main reasons why the photo is actually being taken.

But, I think more metaphorically, it's a means to draw theater out of reality. There is that very obvious sentiment that it is exposing something, but there is something about it that maybe feels like a visual accusation.



*Belt, 2018, from
the series
to shoot the sun*

Whether it is a reflection of light pointing back at me or a flash on a subject—there is something in the idea of a burst of light that is an aggressive form of communication between what I am imaging and the image looking back at me. I’m really interested in that tension, that aggression, and I believe that light can be used to probe it.

I think it relates to the investigative nature of my work. I’ve been using more flash now, which is new for me. In some ways, it feels really nice because I am not working so hard to get pictures that are usable. In *to shoot the sun*, light metaphorically is considered as a way to “freeze” subjects or use to exemplify something that feels stuck, or stuckness.

LB: I’ve been thinking about bursts of light so when I saw them in your work, and how you use them, it was really exciting. It exposes, accuses, and I also think about how it obstructs information. I love what you said about the directionality of the burst, too. It positions you regardless.

You know, the belt image from *to shoot the sun*— that picture is so cropped in.

Originally a terrible photo, haha! And I think I had a crit the next day and I was looking through what I had and I was like I wish this picture is better, and then I was like oh my god, I can crop this! Suddenly it was a good photo. The image wasn't even my idea, it was my partner's idea. That's him in the photograph, too. There is something very inspiring about a well-put-together artist talk or something because it is so stimulating and there is a sense of confidence and structure— those things are important and I try to retain some of that, but I think there's also a part of it where we are not going to talk about how so many pictures are accidents. Maybe part of it is being out of school and trying to navigate that language and what is the right amount of everything to put into the world.

But yeah, that image with the burst of light on the belt— the sun was always something to me that was conceptually interesting and part of the work. That image was kind of a mistake but it did bring out something that was actually at play— something in the work and now really does inform my practice at large. It all happens for a reason I guess!

LB: I feel like even when it is an accident, it's you being able to recognize something in the accident that makes it so quintessential... learning that it was kind of an accident makes this idea of drama and flailing through it so intense.

BC: My favorite part about photography is the sentiment that there is just an infinite amount of images to be made and a lot of them are just this meeting place between— whatever word you want to use: fate, coincidence... and then your camera seeing what is happening in that exact moment of fate. That is what is so exciting about it to me. It's also so overwhelming. Sometimes, I will think about all of the pictures that could possibly be made and if I were to constantly be shooting, what my portfolio would look like.

There is this quote and I forget who said it exactly, but it was something about how if you don't have your camera, then there are no images to be made. I'm sure everyone probably feels differently about it, but it resonated with me. It is strangely comforting. I like considering both notions because it speaks to the magic of photography. But I think it also speaks to working to consider yourself as a human. It's been important to me to think about myself as a human. It's not either/or, but artistry or being an artist can come with so much pressure. How it is set up today is a shit-show; I wish it was a

bit more humanistic. I feel that artistry has become so closely associated with machinery and production... it is important to make but sometimes it feels as though I have ceased thinking about what I am making and merely just producing. It's taken a lot of unlearning after graduation to move into this next phase of whatever having a practice means. I'm just trying to remember what it meant to me at one point and going from there. I try to keep evaluating where I'm at because sometimes I forget to do that and it feels easy to not. At the same time, I genuinely feel like we really do not know what we are doing— I think it becomes really easy to get lost in that sentiment and then just think of yourself as not doing anything at all, which is not true either.

LB: How does the “real” suburban-sublime differ from the photographic “terrain” you are constructing?

BC: I probably wouldn't consider “real-life” suburbia to be sublime, or even fixed, but I'm interested in its potential to appear as so. At the same time, I'm unsure of suburbia's relationship to the ordinary.

LB: What do you think makes you so (visually) sensitive to these landscapes and its patterns? Why do you think you approach the landscape like a study?

BC: Because I never really knew them, and I don't fully understand them. Photography, for me, often feels like an obsession with imaging the unsaid. Because photographing something felt, and not seen (at least in the ordinary, or played out in public space), is so hard to do, I feel investigative. I have to understand small, broken details—things on the periphery of the issue at hand—to feel that an implication has been made.

LB: How would you define the difference between “making” and “taking” photographs?

BC: I think it's really difficult not to feel like you're “taking” something from someone else when their image is potentially entering the marketplace. I don't know if the other person would feel that way but there is an attempt to buckle certain power structures at play. There's also such violent language used to describe photographic practice (shooting, trigger, etc.), that “taking” someone's picture begins to feel like one more intrusive thing. I think we'd all like to think of ourselves as makers, as most other types of artists are automatically considered.



*Untitled, 2020,
from the series
Colors*

I feel that I make images, especially since I'm actively working to draw something interesting or seemingly unnatural out of the ordinary, or to generate a narrative that is not found in a specific time or place, but is compiled through images. There are certainly times, though, when I feel like I'm taking something, especially when working with people. I like to ask people that I'm working with what they think would make an interesting image, or if they have any ideas. Whether we work through them or not, it's a way to mitigate the tension between making and taking, and buckle certain power structures that are always at play. I've even considered telling people that I'm a painter, and that the photograph would only be reference material. I often wonder how that would affect the image-making process. I think it would soften it— less disconcerting, more flattering.

But I think I'm a terrible liar, I would just give in and be honest.

LB: What are you making/thinking about now?

BC: I am dabbling in all of my projects at once– I used to be like I am strictly working on one thing and that is that. And, if I am not doing that then I'm not an artist... Just from graduating, I'm realizing more and more how life can really get in the way. It's not necessarily sustainable for me to think about it so strictly, so aggressively. It was so weird, graduating into covid, and suddenly having to process myself as an artist... or maker...or something– you're something doing something! Trying to reorient that to actually develop a sustainable practice has been really challenging, way more challenging than I thought it was going to be. I think I have been experimenting with what it means to just not obsess over the idea of artistry and being an artist. It's not like I am trying to not be an artist, or turn it into a hobby, but I think there is actually something that could come out of that. Which is, maybe to start thinking about everything you're doing isn't so world-shattering. The world is a big place, things are happening. There are so many moving parts. But, for better or for worse, there is less pressure right now, and it has shifted my understanding and approach to what I am doing.

I'm working on a short film that is examining my relationship with my mom. She was a soap opera actress for seventeen years on *Guiding Light*. It ran for a long time and in the heyday of soap operas, it was one of the big ones. She played this character called Blake, a hot-headed, femme-fatal character who just embodied an insane array of misogynistic tropes. It was also strange because the show, out of all of them, engaged a little bit more with the idea of delivering moving content that wasn't so stuck in the mud of trite soap opera narratives. It was still in that world, but maybe it had a little bit more umph as a show.

I am compiling footage from that I found online. There is also a crazy archive of home-footage of my mom obsessively documenting us. The film is interested in using all this footage to consider this complex web of gazes unfolding in front of me: the camera on my mother, my mother upon me, and myself upon the footage. I'm looking to scrutinize this whole network and aim to examine our shared pursuit of, and implication within, the image, and to unearth psychological complications and shared narratives that arose from my mother's double life when I was a kid. I'm looking for the slippage between these two realities, especially related to sexuality, intimacy, and desire.

Now, looking and thinking about all of this, it informs and makes sense in where I was interested in going visually with photography. I'm only really now getting to that origin point. It's funny because I feel like I can talk about this ongoing project so much better than I can ever really get at my images for some reason. It's so much more obvious to me where all it is coming from and how it impacts everything else I've made thus far. I am looking at all of this crazy soap opera footage of this younger version of my mom—and my mom's character is always housed in this container of male rage and desire, and being thrown between these different affairs and narratives and storylines with all of these different men. It's been really fascinating to go through and attempt to rework the story to present something else. I'm excited to finally, at some point, be done with it— not because I want it to be over, but it has been in-progress so long that I would love to have a bit more of a finite thing to put on the table. It's more experimental than what I normally do but it has been really nice to have something else to do that isn't strictly photography.

LB: Does your mom know you're making this project?

BC: She does. I'm really lucky because my parents are super supportive of it and I am pretty open with them about things I am working on. They're always helping me in whatever way they can— usually by coming outside during winter to make pictures, haha!

I am not sure if she's aware of some of that language I have put around it, but she's always been very open and I think would be actually interested in hearing my reflections upon it now. It's still definitely uncharted territory, and we haven't had an exact conversation about it yet about what it meant for her to be an actress during my childhood and how that affected ideas about life, relationships, and the gaze.

LB: Is it set in one of those cookie-cutter, suburban neighborhood settings?

BC: No, it actually wasn't— which is why perhaps that part has become less related. But, I think the ideas inherent to the show, like fake-looking sets. I also grew up spending a lot of time on the set as a child, I even learned to walk on the set. I spent so much time in these constructed, mini communities and I think that there must be some relationship between that and what has

now become a more focused interest than suburban settings.

I can still remember the smell of it and the ways in which you would open one door and it would lead to a completely different room, or part of the town in the show. You could just walk through the whole thing– it was so unbelievably a fantasy world.

LB: Wow, that must've been... incredibly impactful as a child to have experienced that definition of constructed space and time.

BC: Yea, it's honestly crazy– and now that I am thinking about it, it makes me think about pictures where you jump so easily from one place to the next. It's a very literal thought, but a very literal experience. The ways in which we navigate through images, jumping from one place to the next, reminds me of navigating through that space. It wasn't filmic– it was a jumpy narrative around ideas of moving from space to space that I think photographs are probably more emblematic of, rather than a video or movie which actually speaks to time passing.

LB: You spoke about not being able to photograph interior spaces and I am thinking about that now in the context of your connection to the constructed



Above Ground Pool (Narcissus), 2018 from the series to shoot the sun

set.

BC: I think part of it is just failure, haha! Because I've tried so many times to make images in interior spaces, but for some reason I really struggle with it. I think it's partially because the light is being diffused in a different way, and I'm just trained to work outside because I'm doing it with everything. So it makes it difficult for me to make that transition because I'm not dealing with a plentitude of light. I'm forced to work more specifically with what is readily available. There also becomes this relationship of immediacy– the person you are working with is immediately implicated within the space and these much more apparent relationships between objects and the person. For me, that all becomes so much more emphasized within interior spaces and I just go on information overload and don't know, yet at least, what to do with all of that or how it will work out.

There is something to me that has always been interesting in suggesting tension but not necessarily being explicit about it. There is something that happens– if the tension that I am interested in is something I imagine that is sourced from the private sphere, perhaps it's not actually as interesting to move into where I can directly find it because just takes away that tendency I have to think about what I am interested in, and the imagine what is happening on the periphery and try to work within that realm. Perhaps there is a suggestion to something that has happened, or will be happening, but we're not quite seeing it. If there is a direct involvement in the domestic space or in the literal intrusion into the inside, the privacy... it takes away that prowess that maybe some of the images have.

Being outside, there is a literal vastness that is implied. I find much more freedom to work within that– but I think it just all comes down to formal things, like, I really like to have all of the sunlight to use and play with in different ways. In the interior, you are not getting as much, or maybe you are using artificial light– it's just not as instinctual for me. I find the symbolic relationships that arise inside so much harder to work with for some reason. Maybe it also just comes down to control– I feel much less in control inside, which is weird because it is a much more controlled environment! It becomes more akin to studio photography that implies a necessity for direction, which I don't feel like I can give. Maybe this is why I always struggle to talk about my pictures because it doesn't feel organized whatsoever. It's a weird limbo space that I am working within, which matches the character of

being outside. There is a little less direct relationship between the subject and photographer because there are actual stimuli to react to. That's probably what it is now that I think about it– it makes me feel safer for some reason, there is less pressure.



Left: Porch, 2018, from the series to shoot the sun

Right: Untitled, 2019, from the series Colors







Left: *Rope Swing*, 2018, from the series *to shoot the sun*
Right: *Brothers*, 2018 from the series *to shoot the sun*

Silver Eye Center for Photography
4808 Penn Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15224

Silver Eye Center for Photography is generously supported by our members and individual donors and by the Allegheny Regional Asset District, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Concept Art Gallery, The Heinz Endowments, The Hillman Foundation, Joy of Giving Something, Inc., the Henry John Simonds Foundation, the Irving and Aaronel deRoy Gruber Charitable Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the PNC Charitable Trust, and the William Talbott Hillman Foundation.