

Michael Somoroff Extended Biography

Michael Somoroff grew up in the midst of many of photography's giants. The name "Somoroff" is tightly linked to a certain moment during the "Mad Men" days of advertising and editorial art. Ben Somoroff, Michael's father, together with Irving Penn, is considered by many to be one of the most important American still life photographers in the history of the medium and the original inventor of "tabletop" motion picture making.

As a student of the legendary art director, Alexey Brodovitch, Ben Somoroff introduced Michael at an early age to Brodovitch's revolutionary philosophy, which influenced a generation of photographers, artists, and designers, including Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Robert Frank, Arnold Newman, Lillian Bassman, Milton Glaser, Lester Bookbinder, Henry Wolf and Art Kane to name a few, encouraging him to make unexpected images and push the boundaries of conventional ways of thinking and seeing. Brodovitch urged his students to "show me something I haven't seen before." Thus creating an exciting period of experimentation and innovation in media of all kinds, which remains a dominant influence even today in all areas of cultural production. It has been a driving force throughout Somoroff's work.

In the late-seventies, flushed with assignments after his first major exhibition at New York's International Center for Photography, Michael Somoroff opened his own studio. Eventually he moved to Europe where he became a celebrated photographer in his own right, working in Paris, Milan, London, Hamburg and New York, for magazines such as Life, Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, Stern, Time, Esquire, New York, Zeit and Der Spiegel. His portraiture, nudes and still lifes captured a worldwide audience and received much critical acclaim, as did his many books and exhibitions.

His career as a commercial director was launched in London in the eighties at the famous Directors Studio created by Jim Baker, where the foundations of the commercial production industry were promoted by transforming brand name photographers into commercial directors. Along with the introduction to commercial production given to him through his father Ben, Michael Somoroff initially developed his directorial talents under the direction of the crew at Directors Studio. There additionally he was also influenced by his colleagues Lester Bookbinder and Julian Cottrell. Sought after for his unique lighting and composition skills, Somoroff began directing films earnestly soon after and became one of the most successful commercial tabletop directors in the world.

Invited back to New York in the late eighties, he contributed as a senior partner to the early birthing of MacGuffin Films Ltd. turning it into one of the world's premier tabletop production companies until his departure at the beginning of 2016. As a partner there for 27 years, his work became internationally legendary in the world of tabletop. Somoroff was a major contributor in defining contemporary food photography for four decades, creating award-winning commercials throughout his career for clients such as: Red Lobster, Olive Garden, KFC, Procter and Gamble, Dunkin' Donuts, Burger King, McDonald's, Asahi Beer, Papa John's Pizza, Chili's, Taco Bell, Pepsi, Sony, and countless others seeking to further their brand identity both creatively and strategically, all benefitting from Somoroff's decades long experience and conceptually driven creations. He continues working with many of these clients to this day, having fostered culturally impactful relationships that reach backwards in time across over thirty years. His commercial work, like his fine art work, is featured in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and has been exhibited in museums around the world while winning countless awards. Somoroff is the founder of Somoroff+ Studios, New York City and Los Angeles. He is an official "artist in residence" associated with the Wyss Zurich Translational Center, a collaborative center operated by ETH and the University of Zurich.

Parallel to his career as a successful commercial director and photographer, Somoroff also enjoys a substantial reputation in the art world. In an article published in the "Arts and Leisure" section of the Sunday [*New York Times*](#), the author described Somoroff's approach to creating content as "Madison Avenue meets the Italian Renaissance: big budgets, large teams, high-tech tools and an artist-manager equally at ease with corporate sponsors and Chelsea gallerists." Throughout the creation of his art, Somoroff has developed a manner of approaching specific philosophical categories that is unique to his practice by breaking down ideas into philosophical "signifiers," which he then compares and re-assembles into new philosophical structures wherein a very personal language arises. His methodology fits neatly into a practice of art as an extension of philosophy.

In 2006, Somoroff was commissioned by the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, to create a large-scale outdoor installation, *Illumination I*. It was the first such invitation ever made by the Chapel, and the only addition to it since Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* was placed there some thirty years prior. *Illumination I* - a 12 ton sculpture of light translated via computer programs using photography as their platform, stands over 20 feet high and weighs more than 22,000 pounds. It is a sculptural translation of light falling through the ruins of a composite Mosque. Somoroff found his original inspiration through his own experience at the Rothko Chapel. He imagined the chapel as a metaphysical stage wherein events from anywhere unfold on the horizon and

matrix of eternity. Taking elements from photographs and using the original floor plan of the Rothko Chapel as a foundation, he used a 3-D animation program to create a virtual sacred space – a composite mosque. The finished sculpture is a frozen ray of light captured as it would fall through the window of that virtual space. As the famous art historian David Anfam wrote in the exhibition catalog: “Somoroff’s project renews Rothko’s artistic endeavor which, in a nutshell, sought to combine perceptual immediacy with spiritual import.” As Rothko said upon completing the Chapel paintings, “I wanted to paint both the finite and the infinite.”

In 2007, *Illumination I* was also exhibited at the Aldrich Contemporary Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut in conjunction with the environmental video installation *Illumination* at the BravinLee Programs, Chelsea, New York City. The BravinLee show included five digital projections and the first single projector, immersive 3-D surround sound video installation using high definition video technology and one of the first completely surround, single lens, video projectors ever used in a video art project. Installed in a specially constructed pavilion on the ground floor of the gallery’s building. The centerpiece was the animation of the virtual mosque, projected on a 280 degree curved 45-foot screen. *Illumination* was a synthesis of film, video, high-definition computer animation, and virtual photography components that together with its architectural environment culminated in one seamless, 280 degree surround experience. The mosque slowly moved around the spectator; and over the course of the eight-minute film, the architecture fades, and you are left with just the ray of light. In BravinLee’s press release the projects were described as “*Illumination and Illumination I*, Michael Somoroff’s unprecedented creations, which can be counted both separately and together as groundbreaking and genre-defying. Each work generates a total immersion experience realized through the application of invented technologies. Each reflects the artist’s passion for light and its provocative use as both a real and virtual medium—for video that is sculpture, and sculpture that is architecture.”

Michael Somoroff’s project *Absence of Subject*, began as a way to reconsider August Sander’s life work, *People of the 20th Century*, a typology of the human race begun in 1911. Beginning in 2000, it took Somoroff seven months to complete the first image and seven years to specifically select forty works and then to ‘excavate’ the subjects from Sander’s iconic images. In making the work, Somoroff questioned his own connections to Sander’s subjects. By removing Sanders’ subjects, enigmatic figures to Somoroff, Somoroff revealed the fragility of mortality. *Absence of Subject* is an exercise in appropriation, but more astonishingly it stands as a document that reflects the development of art in the 20th century. In 2011, Somoroff realized *Absence of Subject* in both a book and an exhibition. Amber Terranova in *The New Yorker* called it

"an unconventional homage" to legendary August Sander. *Absence of Subject* has toured extensively to many museums including being exhibited on Piazza San Marco on the occasion of the Venice Biennale in 2011. The entire body of the *Absence of Subject* project was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston under the direction of Anne Wilkes Tucker.

Beginning in 1978, Somoroff began photographing twenty-five of his heroes and mentors and ended with a 2011 triptych of Lillian Bassman (made shortly before her death). These photo sessions granted to Michael were deeply personal, and the project reflects a mutual respect between artists. Nearly 35 years after the first photo session, this historic body of work was published in 2012 in the book *A Moment: Master Photographers, Portraits by Michael Somoroff*. *American Photo Magazine* the reviewer noted "In a series of evocative portraits, Somoroff shows us photographic legends whose names are more familiar than their faces, including such elusive figures as André Kertész, Brassai, Robert Doisneau, Arnold Newman, Horst and others." Lucy Davies in *The Telegraph* wrote: "Extraordinary to look into eyes that have shaped the way we have seen the 20th century."

Work by Somoroff is held in important collections worldwide including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Art OMI, Fields Sculpture Park, New York; The International Center of Photography, New York, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Germany; and Museo Correr, Venice, Italy.

Somoroff's creative endeavors have been seen around the world. His work has been exhibited at museums internationally including: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Art, Detroit Institute of Art, High Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. His work was included in Manfred Heiting's 1986 exhibition "The Great Color Exhibition" in Köln, Germany. He has also participated in important art fairs such as Art Basel, AIPAD, ARCO, and Paris Photo. Somoroff's book projects include *Two Crowns of The Egg*, Michael Somoroff, Donald Kuspit, Giannina Braschi; Damiani, (2014), *The Eyes* magazine special publication, Michael Somoroff, *Absence of Subject*, PhotoPlastik (2014), *A Moment. Master Photographers: Portraits by Michael Somoroff*, William Ewing, Julian Sander and essay by Michael Somoroff; Damiani, (2012), *Absence of Subject: The Images of Michael Somoroff and August Sander*, Anne Wilkes Tucker, Diana Edkins, Julian Sander and essay by Michael Somoroff; Buchhandlung Walther König (2011), *Michael Somoroff: Illumination I at the Rothko Chapel*, David Anfam with essays by Christopher Rothko and Michael Somoroff, Rothko Chapel Books/Stativ Ltd. (2008), *Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding*, David Anfam, Dore Ashton, David E. Brauer, Stephen

Fox, Gérard A. Goodrow, Josef Helfenstein, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Peter Marzio, Marti Mayo, Michael Rees, Michael Somoroff, Phillip James Tabb, and introduction by Christopher Rothko; *The Rothko Chapel Art Series* (2007), *Kinder in Europa*, Nicolai (1988), *The Vegetables Series*, International Center of Photography (1985).

He lives and works in New York.