

## BRUCE WILLEY

*Berlin Branches, 2016*  
Archival Print, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

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# In the Moment

## Falling Leaf Photography

*Photography concentrates one's eye on the superficial.*

*For that reason it obscures the hidden life that glimmers through the outlines of things like a play of light and shade. One can't catch that even with the sharpest lens. One has to grope for it by feeling.*

—Franz Kafka

Photographs of falling leaves are either mistakes or strokes of luck. Gravity, light, and leaf must all come together at a single moment in the great mystery of autumn. As metaphor, the falling leaf awakens us to the fleeting present, reminding us that life is best lived with the spontaneity of *now*. The falling leaf forces us to rethink our relation to nature and time. A Zen master said, “Awakening to this present instant, we realize the infinite is the finite of each instant.”

The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, considered by many the father of photojournalism, said that he thought of himself as a Zen archer, becoming the target in order to “see” the subject he was making a picture of. In this way he sought to seize the moment. “Thinking should be done beforehand and afterward,” he said. “Never while actually taking the photograph.”

So it is that for the past few years I have dedicated myself to capturing one small but significant moment in the natural history of deciduous trees. The moment when a leaf abandons its potent attachment to the tree, strikes out on its own, and floats down to Earth.

It is not easy making photographs of these moments. A hot-tempered, boozed-up hummingbird would be easier to ensnare photographically. Once a leaf becomes airborne it takes on a personality of its own, swayed by the bind of nature and nurture—wind, water, temperature, photoperiod (the lengths of day and night), and the shape and weight of the leaf. Only a few fly perfectly like paper airplanes, gliding graciously into the viewfinder. Most spin and weave and flail in the air for just seconds before cluttering the ground to become the bane of rake and blower, or to enrich the layer of compost on the spongy forest floor.

These airborne moments are transcendent, graceful affairs, playing out billions of times in the autumn air. They are the moments when part of the tree sheds its source of gathering sunlight for photosynthesis and goes into dormancy until spring. All at exactly the point of the departed leaf, the zone of abscission, the bundle scar.

For those that know their way around an f-stop and a shutter speed, I use a long zoom lens (Canon 70–200mm L-Series 2.8) attached to a DSLR Canon 5D Mark II body. (I use digital because trying this with film would bankrupt me.) In order to isolate the falling leaf from the busy background of tree trunks, stems, and leaves that have yet to