

## An Interview with Ursula Schulz-Dornburg

By [Becky Rynor](#), with files from [NGC Magazine Staff](#) on September 08, 2016



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Recently shortlisted for the [Aimia | AGO Photography Prize](#), Ursula Schulz-Dornburg is best known for her primarily black-and-white Conceptual photographs of the built environment.

Born in Berlin in 1938 and currently based in Düsseldorf, Schulz-Dornburg travels extensively, seeking paradoxical architectural forms in everyday landscapes. For example, for over a decade, she repeatedly went to Armenia to photograph concrete bus shelters. Part of that series of gelatin silver prints, *Armenian Bus Stops, 1997–2011*, is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, and documents transit shelters built in the 1970s and 1980s. Each was designed by a different architect, and Schulz-Dornburg found the structures intriguing but odd in the designers' attempts to make them artistic, functional and useful. The so-called shelters were often placed in isolated, barren locations, and generally left transit riders — if there were any — exposed to the elements.

The artist also documents long-abandoned structures that, to her, still bear traces of the people who once used them. She continues to explore how manmade structures interact with the land, and is particularly drawn to documenting architecture in conflict zones.

Schulz-Dornburg's work has been widely shown in Europe and North America at galleries and museums, including the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Tate Modern in London, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Giorgio Mastinu Gallery in Venice, the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

In this interview with *NGC Magazine*, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg talks about how, for her, photographing architecture is about telling the stories of people, past, present and future.

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Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *Opytnoe Pole, Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, Kazakhstan*, 2012, gelatin silver print; framed 49 x 49 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist

**NGC Magazine:** It was recently announced that you are one of four artists on the Aimia | AGO Photography Prize shortlist. How do you feel about this nomination?

*Ursula Schulz-Dornburg:* Speechless. I could not believe that I was nominated for it.

**NGCM:** What draws you to look in the most barren, seemingly lifeless landscapes for signs of life?

*USD:* It's most important for me to find these special structures in barren areas with the possibility of working with the horizon, with very special light, and with time to capture a balance between the object, landscape and myself. By standing in front of the object, my inner eye begins reading it on multiple levels.

**NGCM:** If ruins or abandoned structures are bereft of human activity, what is it you are looking to document or capture?

*USD:* The Hejaz Railway was built under Ottoman rule between 1900 and 1908, and reflects German and Turkish colonial activities in Saudi Arabia. In 1916, Bedouin tribes destroyed the railway line. The stations, tracks and lines had been intended to last forever! More than 30 of these now-functionless buildings can be found between Medina and the Jordanian border, appearing as untouched diminutive objects in the vast desert landscape. Hence my title, *From Medina to the Jordan Border, Saudi Arabia: Sahl al Matran* (2003). My project ended on January 27, 2003, about a month and a half before the invasion of Iraq.



Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *From Medina to Jordan Border, Hejaz railway, Saudi-Arabia*, 2002–03, gelatin silver print; framed 51 x 44,5 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist

**NGCM:** What do these structures “tell” you?

*USD:* They tell me about time, decay and history.

**NGCM:** The series *Armenian Bus Stops, 1997–2011*, is a project that happened by accident. What were the circumstances that led you to create that series?

*USD:* In 1996, I decided to drive from the very north of Armenia, bordering on Georgia, to the very south, bordering on Iran. I was looking for old monasteries and hermitages. While searching, I drove over arid lands and found, to my great surprise, these strange ruins: bus stops in the middle of nowhere on the highlands. Passing by Gyumri on the way to Armavir to find a famous hermitage from the 5th century, I again saw one of these strange bus stops, and I took the first image in a sequence, which became this ongoing series.

There was clearly something avant-garde about these structures. Many of the bus stops are no longer able to provide shelter. The weatherbeaten iron framework now lets in the elements. They have become a symbol of protection, without actually providing any.

Nobody took any notice of the bus stops; perhaps people there were used to them. In any case, even the government had no records of who built or designed them — who these architects

were. To me, they are heroic architectural monuments to the everyday. Often, I would find exceptional women in them, standing in concrete and iron surroundings, seemingly having inherited the heroic promise of Socialism, while still carrying its unfulfilled burden.



Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *Bus stops, Erevan-Yeghward, Armenia, 1997*, gelatin silver print; framed 70,6 x 59,6 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist

**NGCM:** Architecture is always a key component of your photographs. What draws you to architecture — politics? History? Humanity?

*USD:* To me, architecture has a face, a personality. It is about why, for what, and by whom a thing was built. The architecture of Opytnoe Pole (a nuclear test site near Kurchatov in Kazakhstan), for example, was designed by scientists. It reflects the power of destruction and leaves a contaminated desert behind.

Architecture can also be something improvised: for example, a shelter made by digging a cave into the rock for protection, or children building huts to play or dwell in. I think about the transience of shelter a lot. Architecture also runs in the family: my father and my eldest daughter are architects.

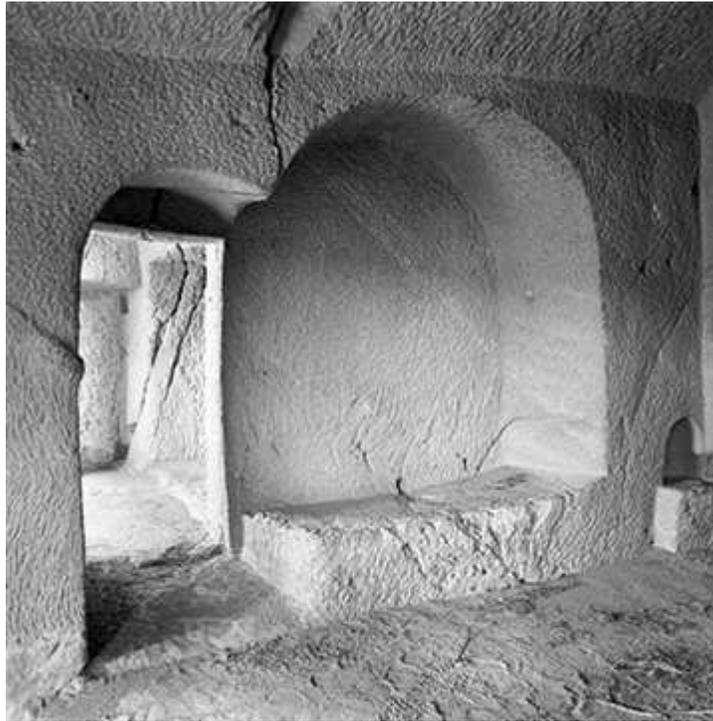
**NGCM:** When you have found something you want to photograph, how important is framing for that shot — for example, close-up, wide shot, foreground, background, sky, periphery? In other words, what do you deliberately include, and what do you cut off?

*USD:* There has to be a balance between subject, landscape and myself. Standing in front of the subject and pressing the shutter release is the culmination of a process. The horizon is my basic coordinate in space. It divides earth and sky, above and below. It is a delineation and, as a border, it establishes a zone of transition, of being “between.”

**NGCM:** Could you describe your approach in your artistic practice? For example, how do you choose a topic, setting, approach, and so forth? Do you shoot analog? Digital? Large-format? Do you develop in a darkroom, or work with a computer?

*USD:* The framing is very important. I work with an old Hasselblad and a 50 mm camera. For the series *Ararat. Armenia* (2006) I had to use a smaller telephoto lens for the distance from Armenia to Turkey, over the Turkish-Armenian border.

I work with black-and-white film and gelatin silver paper. Only the series *Heroic Memories* (2002), exploring dioramas in the Arctic and Antarctic Museum in St. Petersburg was done with the Ixus camera. The *Kronstadt* series (2002/2012) was also shot with the Ixus, then prepared for a photogravure on computer. The *Metro* series (2005) was done with the Hasselblad.



Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *15 km along the Georgian-Azerbaijani border*, 1998–2000, gelatin silver print; framed 37,4 x 44,8 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist

**NGCM:** What is the one place in the world you are hoping to photograph and why?

*USD:* In 1998, I went with an Armenian friend to the desert between Georgia and Azerbaijan, to search for the old Armenian monasteries from the days before Stalin. This is an area where tectonic plates collide — an earthquake zone.

It was a shock for me to find caves in the rocks and hermit cells carved into the rugged cliffs of the mountains between Georgia and Azerbaijan. I had to work with this architecture, which I never would have expected to find in the middle of nowhere. I have to return there to work with this architecture, built in the dark, with forms I never could have imagined. It is known that Syrian monks fleeing the Byzantine Empire during the 7th century hid themselves in these caves.

**NGCM:** Your work has been included in exhibitions at venues such as Tate Modern in London, Giorgio Mastinu Gallery in Venice, and the Centro Fotografico Alvaroes Bravo in Oaxaca, Mexico. In your extensive career, is there one exhibition — group or solo — that is more memorable to you than others, and if so, why?

*USD:* To me, each exhibition is a self-contained experience. Only this moment counts. The context involves space constraints; often a constellation of one or more other artists; meeting with others and working together. Achieving the best result is to me, in a certain sense, a question of life and death over and over again. Because of this, it is difficult for me to choose a more memorable one.

***NGCM:* What projects are you working on now?**

*USD:* I am currently organizing my archive, and I am revising existing projects that have not yet been shown.

***NGCM:* What advice would you give to an emerging artist?**

*USD:* In order to work today, it is important for artists to be realistic and have several options whereby they can support themselves, in order to be fully immersed in life.

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The **Aimia | AGO Photography Prize** exhibition is on view at the [Art Gallery of Ontario](#) until **January 1, 2017**. The other finalists whose work is presented in the exhibition are: **Talia Chetrit (USA), Jimmy Robert (France), and Elizabeth Zvonar (Canada)**. For more information, please [click here](#).

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## About the Author

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Becky Rynor is a journalist and editor based in Ottawa.