

# TWO WAY LENS

Interviews with  
contemporary photographers

BY MICHAEL WERNER

Monday, February 21, 2011

## Jane Fulton Alt

MW

**What inspired you to start taking photographs, and what is the primary inspiration for you to keep working in this field?**

JFA

My photographic beginnings were very basic, initially. I was taking a trip to SE Asia and wanted to learn how to use a new camera. I had been taking various art classes at a local art center at the time and decided to enroll in a photography class. I had a wonderful photography teacher, Dick Olderman, who exposed me to the poetry of photography. I was an avid quilter at the time and had explored ceramics, drawing and painting. I realized that the camera allowed me easier access to exploring the world around me.

Essentially, my photographic explorations have drawn from my life and from asking questions about what it means to be alive. I am a clinical social worker (of 35 years) and raised a family of 3 children. I have also had the privilege of extensive travel, which has fueled my inquiry into what is universal to all people, regardless of race, religion or culture.

Contemplating man's universal striving for love/connection, I have focused on the tension between love and separation. Man's very first separation or disconnect happens at the moment of birth, when the umbilical cord is cut. This led me to explore pregnancy and how we all enter into life. After "documenting" several births, I created my first conceptual body of work, "Before the Butterflies."

I then decided to explore our last and final separation, the moment of death. Death is one of the great mysteries of life and it is the only thing that is certain in life. This exploration has been ongoing and will probably continue until I take my last breath. I have visited slaughterhouses in Louisiana, Mexico's Day of the Dead, and worked with hospice, both as a photographer and then as a volunteer. All of these experiences have enriched my life, both spiritually and photographically.

I have numerous bodies of work, many of which were created after exposure to places or events. In the fall of 2005, I discovered the power of combining my 2 professions, social work and photography. Previous to then I had kept the 2 careers very separate. I volunteered in the relief efforts post Katrina for 2 weeks in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans on a program called "Look and Leave". After 3 days of accompanying residents back to their homes for the first time since fleeing, I had a melt down. I returned to my hotel room and realized I needed to more. I needed to photograph what I was seeing and hearing in order to be the ambassador for the people I was serving, as a way to keep their needs in focus and their stories alive. It was a turning point in my life as I realized the power of merging both professions. This integration has continued and infuses my work with a potency I had not previously known.

The Burn is my most current work. It addresses the life cycle. My artist statement communicates my current "take" on life....

*"While accompanying restoration ecologists on prescribed burns, I am drawn to the ephemeral quality of the single moment when life and death are not opposites, but rather parts of a single process to be embraced as a whole.*

*As fate would have it, this project began on the same day (and actual hour) of my sister's first chemotherapy treatment, having just been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The parallels between the burn and chemotherapy were immediately revealed to me as I photographed with my sister in my heart and mind.*

*Burning helps reduce invasive vegetation that crowd out native plants, allowing sunlight to reach the seedlings. By opening the woodlands to more daylight, the fires prepare the soil for new spring growth, and the cycle of renewal continues. So too, chemotherapy removes unwanted growth, allowing for new healthy cells to reestablish themselves. It was with this deeper understanding of the life cycle that these images*

### About Two Way Lens

Two Way Lens is a project designed to inform and inspire emerging photographers wanting to focus their creative output in a way that enhances their chances of finding an audience, being included in exhibitions and ultimately achieving gallery representation. The journey from inspired artist to successful artist is one that is often difficult to negotiate and hard to control. On these pages, I will feature the experiences and opinions of other photographers who I have found inspiring, and hopefully the knowledge they have built in their own experiences will be valuable to all of us finding our own way to sharing our creativity with the wider world.

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### Collaboration



Two Way Lens and Bokeh Magazine. Find an interview from the archives each month in Bokeh Magazine

were created.”

I have found several quotes to be very helpful to me in trying to understand why I do what I do...One is by Andrey Tarkovsky, the genius of modern Russian cinema who died in 1986. He wrote *Sculpting in Time*, where he discusses his philosophy of filmmaking and art. He states in chapter 2, *Art...A Yearning for the Ideal*, that “The goal for all art...is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence...Art is a means of assimilating the world, an instrument for knowing it in the course of man’s journey toward what is called absolute truth.”

Another quote is from a poet, Wislawa Szymborska, who spoke on inspiration after receiving a Nobel prize December 7, 1996....

“I’ve mentioned inspiration. Contemporary poets answer evasively when asked what it is, and if it actually exists. It’s not that they’ve never known the blessing of this inner impulse. It’s just not easy to explain something to someone else that you don’t understand yourself. When I’m asked about this on occasion, I hedge the question too. But my answer is this: inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists generally. There is, has been, and will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It’s made up of all those who’ve consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers, gardeners - and I could list a hundred more professions. Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it’s born from a continuous “I don’t know.” ..... This is why I value that little phrase “I don’t know” so highly. It’s small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended.”

MW

**In your opinion and experience, how can emerging photographers evaluate themselves as ready to start promoting their works and seek broader exposure for their photographs? What is one vital action you would recommend photographers undertake to find their audience, be included in exhibitions, and gain professional representation?**

JFA

Art does not exist in a vacuum and needs to be seen by others. Feedback is essential.

Artists are constantly evolving and sometimes it is difficult to know if one is prepared to put the work out in the public. It is important to have feedback on the work, thru critiques, classes, portfolio reviews or individual consultations. Enter photo competitions but do not be discouraged if you are not included. Rejection is just part of the process. There is a blog that belongs to a writer that is solely devoted to all of her rejection letters!

I think it is important to look at other people’s work, via books, the internet, or galleries.

That said, I know that my work only progressed as it did because I was and am not making it for a “market.” My goal was never to “make it.” My path has been different from many photographers. I did not formally study photography and have not looked to photography for financial support as I had another source of income (thru my social work). My goal has always been to attempt to express my inner most concerns thru the photography. I rarely photograph for others and see my photographic practice as “sacred space.” This has been how I have carved out my practice. I think the challenges are great for the photographic market today.

MW

**How did it come about that you achieved the status of successful, professional photographer? What steps were involved in reaching your level of success?**

JFA

There have been many factors in getting the work out there. First and foremost, the work needs to be strong. Secondly, one needs to have the work seen. A web presence is essential and has led to tremendous opportunities for me. Portfolio reviews are efficient ways to have the work seen by many curators and collectors who would be very difficult to approach in other circumstances. Another alternative to the expense of traveling to a portfolio review is an online review such as Critical Mass (sponsored by Photolucida) which costs a fraction of traveling to a portfolio review. If the work is strong, it will be picked up.

But really, what is most important is just going back to doing the work.. and loving what you are doing.

My advice to emerging photographers is...

There is nothing more meaningful than being true to yourself and finding your own voice. Follow your heart and don’t let anyone discourage you. I once attended a portfolio review session providing feedback from 4 internationally renowned photographers. I had brought 20 photographs and saw each reviewer separately. In the end, I was surprised that each expert cared for different images, and had varied suggestions for how to continue my work. If each expert had been my teacher, I would have pursued 4 different directions and lost my way.

It is vital for any artist to nurture and protect that which will make your vision unique. One need to go inward instead of outward and learn to trust your own inner guide, preserving your identity and finding the

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- [Aline Smithson](#)
- [Amy Elkins](#)
- [Amy Stein](#)
- [Andrew Phelps](#)
- [Charlie Grosso](#)
- [Chip Simone @ Jackson Fine Art Gallery](#)
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answers from within.

If you must have a rule to follow, I suggest cultivating a dialogue with your inner voice and photograph with your heart. If you listen to the clues your own images offer, the resulting work will be fresh and authentic. Fall in love with your world, shoot a lot, and technical problems will straighten themselves out.



Burn No. 26



Burn No. 45

- [Tom Griggs](#)
- [Tony Mendoza](#)
- [William Greiner](#)
- [Yael Ben-Zion](#)
- [Zoe Strauss](#)

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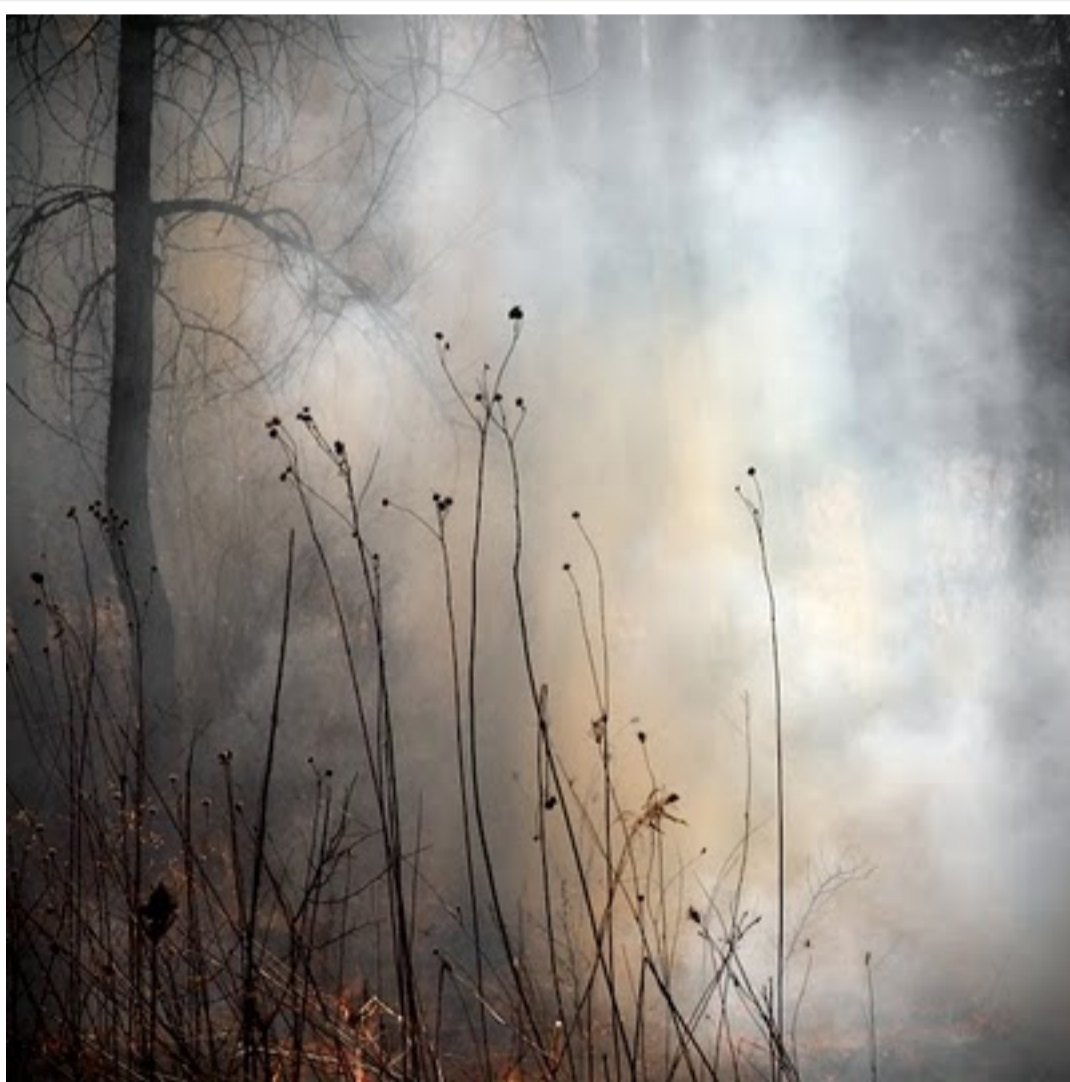

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