



DENISE B CHANDLER

PHOTOGRAPHER

INTERVIEW BY HARRYET CANDEE

Harryet Candee: Denise, you have a show opening this month at the 510 Warren Street Gallery in Hudson, NY. I know this is new work... can you share with us what this show is about and how it came to be?

Denise Chandler: "Nature in Abstract: Reimagined Form, Scale & Gesture" is the title of my new show, and it is being shown for the first time. In 2009, I attended an exhibition at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, entitled "Dove/O'Keeffe: Circles of Influence." I was so enthralled with the exhibit that I was moved to explore my own passion for nature with my camera. Dove and O'Keeffe coaxed the viewer to see nature with a heightened awareness of its forms and designs. In this show, I move forward with the ideas generated by O'Keeffe's large-scale floral paintings. I use my camera as a paintbrush, capturing the grand scale, the microcosmic exploration of natural form and color.

The images in this exhibit are large and bold, with intense color. They are presented in an acrylic fusion

process that is as contemporary as the images themselves; this adds depth, crispness and complexity to the images.

The exhibit will run from September 30th through October 30th. A meet-the-artist reception will be held on Saturday, October 8th at the gallery. Gallery hours are Friday and Saturday from 12 to 6 and Sunday from 12 to 5.

I have known you for a very long time, and I'm so proud of you and what you've accomplished as a photographer. Did you ever think you would have taken your art to this level? How did it all happen?

Denise: Never once did I imagine that at this point in my life I would be creating fine art, working most days for eight to ten hours in my studio. Creating has been second nature to me since I was a young child; it is only the medium that has changed throughout my life.

You ask, "How did it all happen?" Well, that's a

really big question, and I'll try to keep the answer to a minimum. My first introduction to creating art was when I was in 3rd or 4th grade. My father had the idea of making table-top Christmas trees with pinecones. This quickly became a family event. On weekends, my dad would take my siblings and I to Tanglewood to pick up the fallen pinecones that lined both sides of the driveway. We soaked the pinecones for weeks in water until they closed up. At that point, we molded chicken wire and pushed the cones through the holes and waited for the cones to dry and open back up. There it was—a perfectly shaped Christmas tree that we spray-painted and decorated with beads. We sold the trees for \$3.00 each. It was the early 60s, and everything was reasonably priced (and we worked cheap!). That was the start of my lifelong interest in creating, long before terms like "creative process" and stores such as Michaels existed.

This experience was my first introduction into the creative process... making art that took many weeks



Denise B Chandler **Hydrangea Vase** 2016

to create, a commitment to a timeline, as well as visualizing the end product to determine if there was a market for pinecone Christmas trees. The same skillset that I learned to apply as a child, I still use today in creating art... although it has thankfully been refined.

The years went by and many projects came and went, holding varying degrees of interest for me. Looking back, some were rather odd, like the year I spent painting furniture with fruits and vegetables, sticks, rocks... actually anything that wasn't a traditional paintbrush comes to mind. Then I spent years quilting, and was 100% invested in it with both my time and my heart. Several of the walls in my home are covered with the quilts I made during those years. I still have three quilts in various stages of completion that I hope someday to get back to and finish. What kind of artist would I be if I didn't leave projects to be resumed later on, right?

I always had a camera... not an expensive camera or even a 35mm, but an automatic film camera. And I did okay with it. When the digital point-and-shoots entered the market, I started using one and was happy that I could photograph all day and not spend a dime on film or developing. I started getting more creative and comfortable experimenting, but I was limited as to how much I could do with the camera I had. I knew my son had left his DSLR while he was away at school, so I decided to check it out. Although I didn't know it then, the day I opened that camera bag, I found a passion like I had never known before. It took me a minute to know I had no idea what to do

with the DSLR camera I was holding. This led me to IS183 and a week-long boot camp for new photographers. Before the week ended, I knew three things for sure... one, I was hooked on photography; two, this was going to be an all-encompassing interest; and three, I needed better equipment. I instinctively knew my commitment would be very strong. Therefore, I made a commitment to buy professional equipment and the best lenses Canon made. Yes, I'm a 100% Canon fan. I have never been sorry about that decision and the money spent, because in the long run, I saved money by not buying entry-level and then intermediate camera bodies and lenses. I bought where I knew I would end up.

There is a constant exploration and discovery of self that needs to take place in order to project who you are through your art. What have you learned about yourself throughout this period of discovery in your life, that might be evident in your photography?

Denise: What I want to express to others is dependent on the body of work I'm presenting to them. Example: Several years ago, I was exhibiting images at the Tivoli Artists Gallery in a show entitled "Erotica." The images I chose were meant to make the viewer feel uncomfortable and/or question what they were seeing and why they were feeling what they were... as in, what do you carry in your personal baggage to make you feel as you do? The images were presented large, with no matting, so the work was right in your face... The images appeared to be male and female

genitalia, with one image suggesting a penis penetrating a vagina... all of these images were different parts of flowers, photographed with a specialized macro lens at 5x life. People's level of comfort with these images was extremely personal, based on their experiences. I photographed these images, and there were times even I was uncomfortable with them. I know why I felt as I did, and I assume everybody else had their own personal thoughts, based on their own life experiences.

I have learned that if I want others to have a reaction to my art, then I have to be honest while creating it... without honesty the art is not successful. I currently have two major projects I've been working on, on and off for years, that deal with women's issues and are very personal for me, which is why it's taking me years to finish the projects.

When you are at a loss for ideas, but really want to produce something great and move forward on your creative path, what helps you to get there?

Denise: When that happens—and it does happen—I look at the art of others. And it doesn't matter what type of art... I visit a museum, a gallery, an exhibit. I walk through a sculpture park, go to a play or concert, or I look at my many art books... anything that resets my seeing and thinking that will ultimately bring me new and fresh creativity. Another technique I apply often is to go into my archives—look at things I haven't looked at in a long time. I find that revisiting images that I captured months or even

Continued on next page...



Denise B Chandler **Untitled #2** 2016

years earlier lets me see new possibilities that I hadn't seen when I first examined them. This is particularly helpful now that I am working more on what I call "photo art" and "alternative processing."

Tell me Denise, what do you consider your main focus with your work?

Denise: My main focus is to create interesting art... not pretty art. To create intuitive, abstract art. I want to make the ordinary extraordinary, and I want the viewer to see in a new way. My work has become much more conceptual over the years, which is very liberating for me. I no longer have to carry a camera with me all the time. I've learned the difference between photographing for work versus for fun or family life. However, there are always exceptions to the rule, and I try to stay flexible. I do enjoy photographing many events that have absolutely nothing to do with the art I exhibit, i.e. horse shows, dog shows, rural events, etc.

Who was your first and most important mentor? Who helped you to feel you can masterfully work your way through this medium and come up with pretty good final results?

Denise: This is the easiest question to answer... The first and most important mentor to me has been and is Cassandra Sohn, owner of Sohn Fine Art Gallery. I met Cassandra in 2010, while taking a photography class that she was teaching at IS183. At the time, I was looking to find someone I could work with privately, and she was willing to accommodate me.

Cassandra came to my home weekly for two hours, and at the end of our sessions she left me with homework to have completed for our next session. She exposed me to the technical aspects of photography. She taught me to discern the difference between a good image and an exceptional image. We kept this schedule for nearly two years until she opened Sohn Fine Art in Stockbridge (the gallery moved to Lenox in 2014). In true mentor form, Cassandra has been there for me as I've explored this new part of myself. I am grateful for her continued friendship, encouragement and guidance.

Photography is a very technical form of art. So much to study and understand! What training did you put yourself through—formal and otherwise—in order to achieve insight into photography?

Denise B Chandler: With my photography mentor committed to her new gallery, I was looking for a way to continue my education in photography. It was April 2012 when I found out about Maine Media Workshops (formerly Maine Photographic Workshops); I decided I needed to check them out. Three weeks later, I had submitted my portfolio for review, and was soon accepted into the 2012 summer residency program. I rented a small house in Camden, Maine for three months, spending the summer immersed in photography. The residency program was twelve weeks long. This included eight workshop weeks with renowned photographers and four weeks with a program mentor who critiqued and kept me

focused on a final project, a ten-image portfolio. I was busier than I ever imagined, working from early morning to late evening on weekdays. Weekends were for resting and visiting with my husband and dog, who would arrive on Friday and leave on Sunday. This will perhaps sound strange, but this was the very first time in my life I had lived alone. I had gone from living with my parents to living as a married woman. By time I made the decision to move to Maine, my son was grown and I had been re-married nearly twenty years. This was a new experience and enormous challenge for me, and I loved every single minute of it.

I ended up staying in Maine a few more weeks than I had planned, to take a couple more workshops. I had been there nearly four months when I finally moved back home. The intensity of the workshops I completed would equal a year, if not two years, of a college photography program.

Every year since 2012, I have continued my photography education by studying with a "master," a big hitter, in the world of photography. Sometimes those programs have been very technical; other times more about creativity or processing. I find that studying with such experienced and significant photographers offers me perspective that I am not able to achieve on my own.

Have you delved into any other mediums? Do you enjoy painting, or even theatre experience, to gather ideas and experimentation? Or has it been solely through the use of the lens?

Denise: Before photography, I worked in many other mediums, many of them for years. There was pysanka (Ukrainian Easter eggs), which I created for years and still occasionally make during the Lenten season. I invested years in quilting, and made many quilts that are all around my home. I exhibited in quilt shows, I traveled the Northeast to quilt shows and I did what all quilters do... bought fabric at every show I attended! I have enough fabric stored away to make at least a dozen new quilts. And of course there was knitting, crocheting, painting, calligraphy, etc.

Currently, I'm finding ways to take my photography to the next level by working with my images in other mediums such as encaustics, transfers, and textures. There is no end to the possibilities this medium is opening up to me. I'm very pleased with the results.

As for the performance arts you mentioned, I enjoy theatre, and in particular Broadway shows. However, I have absolutely no talent whatsoever in theatre, dance or music. For several years, I would drive into NYC and go to an afternoon Broadway show, take a walk through Central Park, have dinner, and then take in a second show before driving back home to Lenox.

Where are you now in terms of your art, and where would you like to be down the line?

Denise: I'm exactly where I want to be. I'm signed and represented by Sohn Fine Art Gallery on Church Street in Lenox. and I'm an artist/owner associate at the 510 Warren Street Gallery in Hudson, New York. Between the two galleries, I'm busier than I had ever planned. Up until this past February I was also a participating member of the Tivoli Artists Gallery in Tivoli, New York. Three galleries were just too much of a commitment. The travel back and forth to Tivoli took too much valuable time that I could be applying to the other two galleries. When my membership was due to expire, I let it lapse. As long as I'm able to continue creating art that pleases me first and others second, I'm exactly where I want to be.

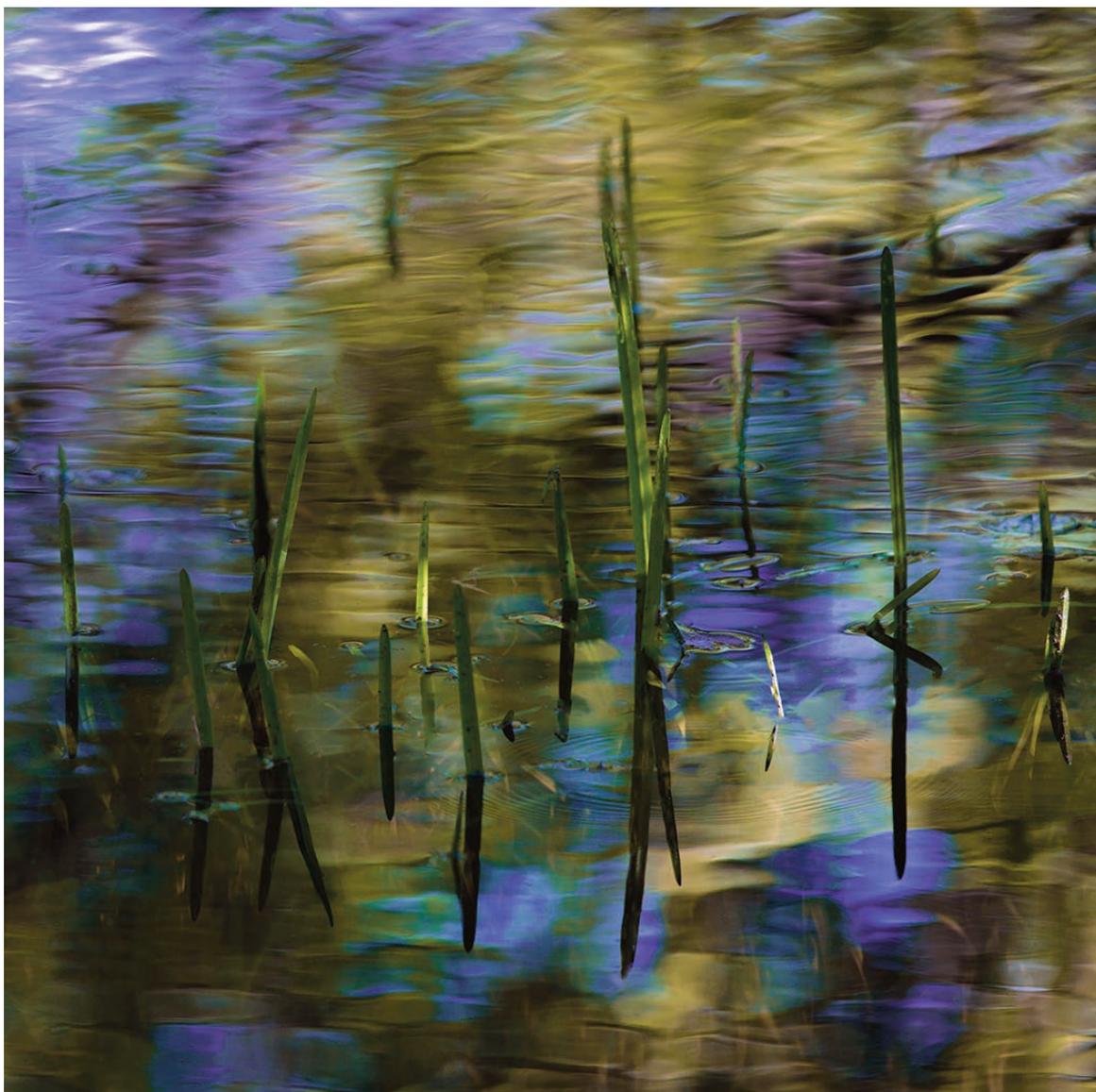
Have you ever considered the prospect of teaching photography?

Denise: Not once... I can't even begin to imagine what that would look like. Photography is private for me. I have a small group of friends that I critique with. I open my private studio to these friends and share willingly. Other than that, I stay private with the majority of my work. To me, photography is about seeing and conveying the subject of your image to others. Last summer, a friend and I were in Maine photographing at a small dahlia farm. Our images couldn't have been more different, even though we were at the same place at the same time, with the same natural light. We photographed what we saw differently, based on how we conceptualized our images, both while shooting and after processing.

What subject matter makes you feel passionate about your work? Why?

Denise: The subject matter I'm currently working on is what I'm most passionate about. I know what I'm going to create before I pick my camera up. I do not

Continued on next page....



Denise B Chandler Hosmer Pond Wonderland 2016



Denise B Chandler Sheep Milking 2014



Denise B Chandler **Untitled** 2014

do any commercial photography, i.e. senior portraits, weddings, etc.

I print and frame my own art with archival products. My art is museum-quality assembled and presented, and all of the images are limited editions, offered in various sizes.

Denise, can you tell us a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, your family history?

Denise: I am a lifelong resident of Lenox, Massachusetts. I attended Lenox public schools, graduating from Lenox Memorial High School in 1973. I have two brothers and one sister. We grew up on Walker Street near the center of town. When I was a child, stores were not open on Sunday, there were no malls, banks closed at 3:00 p.m. on weekdays and weren't open on weekends, ATMs hadn't been invented; it was a very different time than today. I had a wonderful childhood. There were many families with children the same ages as me and my siblings, who lived in the same neighborhood. We rode bicycles around town and up to the Lenox Bird Sanctuary. We would go to Kimball's Stable and play around the horses. We went to church every Sunday and had a big Sunday afternoon dinner, followed by Sunday drives around the county. Life was simpler, and I think I grew up in a nicer time than kids today. We didn't have the options that are available today. We only had three television channels, and no computers; therefore we learned to read books, play games, ride bikes, ice skate, and go sledding. We spent our summer afternoons with our friends at the town beach... no-

body had pools then. We learned to make things by using whatever we could find, and we made up stories and acted them out for our parents on an imaginary stage.

On Saturday mornings, I went to catechism, then to Aspinwall Stable for my weekly riding lesson. Then I spent the whole afternoon with my friends at the barn. I really did have a wonderful childhood in the town that has become my lifelong home.

I'm wondering, what buttons do you need to push in order to get your viewers to feel emotion? How do you capture an emotion through the lens?

Denise: We touched on this a bit previously... For me that button is honesty. When I say honesty, I mean that I have to believe that what I'm presenting has a basis in reality. If I'm presenting one of my floral abstracts, there has to be at the very least a small bit of reality in it. If I capture a landscape and layer it with several textures and present it in an alternative process, there still has to be the vastness of a landscape, whether it be a rural or urban landscape.

What was it about photography that drew you in? What made you continue on this path?

Denise: The immediate gratification of digital photography, and the fact that I could create art by leaving the house, rather than being stuck behind a sewing machine or a quilting frame. I had been making quilts that could take a few years to create, or Ukrainian Easter eggs that could take a week or longer for one egg. Photography was freeing... and

I could photograph the other interests in my life, giving a whole new purpose to events I had been attending for years.

Right brain, left brain—you need both to accomplish a good piece of artwork, especially with photography. Are you aware of how you put your natural skills on both sides to use? What if you lacked in the technical side of photography, but were purely creative-minded? What are the challenges here?

Denise: I'm very aware of how I use my "natural skills," as you call them. I am often in conflict with myself as I create. There is Denise who is compulsive about details, where every i must be dotted and every t crossed. That Denise is project-driven, and will work without sleep to get something done; always following the fundamentals of photography. Then there is Denise who is a free spirit and is driven to operate outside the rules of photography. For me, that is where traditional photography ends and photo art begins. I work hard to find a balance.

How has the gallery scene been for you since you first decided to come out and show your art publicly?

Denise: Wonderful, challenging, and validating. The road to gallery work is not easy, nor is it fast. I began the process by building a resume of exhibits, by responding to "Call For Entries" locally and regionally. I was fortunate to have been accepted into many shows; winning awards along the way. I submitted



Denise B Chandler **Housatonic River #2** 2016

images to the Annual Community Arts Exhibition at Sohn Fine Art Gallery in 2012, 2013, and 2014. All three years my images won the People's Choice Award, along with either a first or second place overall. At the end of 2014, Cassandra Sohn offered me gallery representation at Sohn Fine Art Gallery. I was extremely honored and excited. It was a great validation of the hours of study, the workshops attended and the exhibitions, which had all been worthwhile. Shortly after signing with Sohn, I joined the other two galleries I mentioned previously, and I remain as an artist/owner associate at 510 Warren Street. I have also built a studio/gallery at my home.

Does it require a good amount of people skills to get yourself out there showing your art? Has it been easy?

Denise: This is one of my favorite parts of this journey. I'm very comfortable meeting new people while networking at gallery openings. I haven't found that to be difficult; actually, just the opposite. At this point, I'm not looking to expand beyond the two galleries representing my work. I am very happy meeting new clients and artists, creating new art, and knowing that my art is bringing pleasure to those who view it and purchase it.

What are your most important and most useful tools of the trade? Was there anything you purchased mistakenly, having discovered later it was not for you? Anything you thought you'd never use that turned out to be your new best friend?

Denise: My camera and computer would be my most important and frequently-used equipment. Before I became more seasoned as a photographer, I often carried two cameras and several lenses. Fortunately, those days have passed. Now, I go out with one camera and usually two lenses, no more. While traveling, I will still pack more equipment, but only because I never know where my travels will take me. I don't recall ever mistakenly purchasing equipment. I have consciously purchased the best equipment possible. I research my purchases thoroughly and do my best to get what I want. I have, however, purchased equipment for a project (or when I can't pass up an opportunity) that I didn't use immediately. But I eventually will use it and then it will be my new best friend. At least that's what I tell my husband.

What would you tell novice photographers, as far as what to do and what not to do?

Denise: Be honest. Never stop photographing. Always welcome the support and encouragement of a mentor.

How has your life improved since your discovery that being behind the lens is your way of being alive and happy?

Denise: I'm grateful that I get to share my view of the world with people, and that they seem to be interested in what I have to show them. It's a dream come true.

Where does most of your support come from when beginning a new and possibly scary project?

Denise: I have great family and friends, but it's my dogs who are with me the most as I create. I can't imagine creating art without them beside me.

Are there any issues relating to art—or types of art—that baffle you? Anything that tries your understanding?

Denise: No. I like all art; it's all important. It adds great depth to my life. Even when I'm unfamiliar with something, I enjoy learning to appreciate it.

The expenses of being a photographer are high. Are there ways in which you cut corners or sacrifice, like not buying the latest equipment?

Denise: Yes, photography is expensive; there is no way around it. The more equipment, the greater the expense. Cameras and lenses are not all created equal; there are many different price points for what appears to be the same equipment, but it's not the same. My personal choice has been to buy my lenses, flashes and accessories from the same manufacturer as my camera. There are several companies making less expensive lenses that will mount to my Canon camera bodies; as of now I haven't tried them.

In your opinion, what in your belief system is reflected in your work?

Denise: Honesty...

