

Extending the Vision by Terri Pakula

Words began to follow and stay with many of the images . . .

I studied and loved art ever since I was a young child. I majored in it in high school and also wrote poetry, which I was looking to publish at that time. However, a house fire destroyed my writings and much more right before I was to attend my second year of undergraduate school. I never wrote poetry again till much later but that will tie into my reunion with infrared.

During my studies for my B.F.A. I majored in art education and mainly sculpture. I took one photography course and back then in the 1970s the camera I had to use for the class was a plastic one, which took 120 film. I remember seeing an exhibit at a gallery by a photographer where all the pictures were done with the same plastic camera and they were beautifully processed in tonal range and were emotionally provoking in imagery.

I must admit even back then I was slow to learn film developing and camera controls for exposure depth of field, etc. Just show me numbers and I froze.

My life turned to teaching art in Australia where I took many photography classes myself and put in a dark room in the high school where I taught. Upon returning to the states I went for my M.F.A. in art/education/photography.

There my education really started in photography. Learning how to use this tool as an extension for creativity and not letting it get in the way technically was a challenge I was finally able to overcome. Yes, all the numbers did sink in. It was during this time that I found the 8 X 10 camera and of course 35 mm and infrared amongst other photographic creative tools beyond dodging, burning, developer, the stop bath and more.

I remember being so passionate in creating a series of infrared images with the 8 X 10 camera of a famous cemetery where Lincoln's assassin was buried.

After exhibiting some of my work for a few years my career took me in other directions where creativity was generalized into other areas of life for many years, from teaching art to special education populations to working with those challenged with autism for over 25 years.

The simple digital point and shoot camera worked well but it took so long for the camera to refresh itself that I lost many shots. Once the DSLR came out and the price dropped I decided to get one around 2002. After 3 years of tutorial DVDs, classes and private lessons some of the stuff started to sink in. It seemed so much more complicated than my old Nikomat and Nikon SLR. Some things we have no control over so I played around with the DSLR on and off but what really got me back into it and what brought me back to infrared was when my folks sold their home in New York and were in Florida full time. In 2003-4, dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. My folks still came up to New York to live here for 5 months for the first 2 years of his illness so I wasn't going to Florida then. Once they sold the house in New York my visits to Florida started with my going down a few times during the year. Being an out of state caregiver in some ways was devastating for me and my emotions were right there. I began to experiment with infrared filters and the DSLR back in New York. It really started to spark something in me as I was seeing something, which wasn't there and was able to get a different feeling than just taking a picture. Now the plunge and the converted DSLR camera to infrared. It became my companion whenever I went to Florida and suddenly a whole new world opened up for me. When I post processed the images back in New York they started to speak to me from a very deep place. Words began to follow and stay with many of the images, which became an expression for the otherworldliness of Alzheimer's or the space in time that a caregiver finds oneself.

The thought of self-publishing a book based on the words and images to raise money for Alzheimer's started to occupy my mind. The book came to fruition and now my main focus is to promote awareness of this horrific disease through exhibits of the images from the book and to help raise money through the publication itself.

What is really amazing throughout this whole process of how I came full circle back into photography is how the death of my dad really saved my life. Dad died on November 3, 2009. I had been going down to Florida with unexpected trips as he was going down hill quickly since the summer of 2009. Not feeling well myself I figured it was stress and other things but nothing serious. I had a trip booked for Veterans Day weekend so I could attend parent teacher conference then fly down. I got the call to come down sooner as he only had a few days left. Not given more than 4 days for a funeral by the Department of Education in New York City I went to see his doctor so I could extend my stay with some sick leave to help mom. His doctor picked up on my symptoms and sent me for tests, to see specialists and finally a bilateral temporal artery biopsy, which confirmed the diagnosis. I could have had a stroke at any minute or gone totally and permanently blind. I did lose some vision in one eye but it is manageable. If dad were still alive by Veterans Day, I would have lost my sight by then. He really saved my life and although I was never that close to him I feel much closer now. I was able to complete the most important work I ever did as a photographer. I wonder how I got here and where it will take me. Beyond the Veil There are so many ways to think about how to start the juices flowing again. Does one just take out the camera and do an exercise? Almost like practicing scales over and over again on the piano. These are valuable to do as it helps us perfect our technique and master the skills necessary so the camera becomes an extension for our vision.

I feel that having a commitment to share something that comes from deep inside with integrity and purpose can become an important expression of work. It can have even more of an impact if that work can touch the life of one person in a new way or reinforce for them something they already know. I finally took my cameras out this February. I see a whole other series to do now in infrared. What is also happening for me is that words are also following the images too. Joining other photography groups whether it is live groups which meet and/or on-line groups are other supportive venues. I

joined both and have found them very inspiring and thought provoking. Although I didn't, and at the time couldn't, take out the camera before February I was suddenly moved by possibilities as I looked out of my window last week and saw the snow. I was now ready and all the readings on-line and meetings I had attended had already planted the seeds of inspiration, encouragement and possibilities. One never knows how much they can have an impact on others when they are willing to share their work. I thank all the online and photography groups which meet in person.
Terri Pakula