



WHEN PHOTOGRAPHY & ART COLLIDE

An interview with Photographer, Jessica Drossin

Written by Kent DuFault



INTRODUCTION

I have been involved in photography since 1974. I guess that dates me somewhat, doesn't it?

I've seen many changes in the world of photography over the years.

I have viewed the work of thousands (if not tens of thousands) of photographers. Some of them were among the finest photographers to ever press a shutter button. Others were trying to achieve that success. Most were somewhere in the middle.

The digital age has 'upped the ante' for photography. Many folks who would never have bothered to pick up a camera just a few decades ago are now pumping out images by the thousands.

This is not a bad thing, I suppose. But, believe me when I say, "It's very, very, hard to stand out from the crowd."

And then, when I believe that I've seen it all: a photographer like Jessica Drossin crosses my path.

When I witnessed my very first Jessica Drossin photograph I felt like I'd been sucker punched. All the air left my lungs. My eyes were riveted to the image. I couldn't pull them away. There was a cacophony of emotions that swirled around inside of my head.

I don't know if you experience this kind of emotional energy when viewing art, but perhaps you can relate to a song that makes you want to cry, or a movie that has you on your feet cheering at the end, or a book

that you read long past your bed time because you absolutely have to know what happens next.

All of these are examples that represent human creative effort.

That is art.

When photography and art collide, it creates an experience for the viewer.

I'm about to show you the Jessica Drossin photograph that lit up my imagination.

You may react in the same way, or you may not; that's why it's called art. We all interpret things our own way. When Van Gogh was alive, many regarded his paintings as dismal and not even worth the canvas they were painted on. And today, they are revered worldwide.

But, apparently Jessica Drossin is doing something right, because it isn't just me that has recognized this unique talent.

She's been internationally published, and in 2013, she won the Emerging Professional Fine Art Photographer of the Year Award from Digital Photo Pro Magazine. Her posts on social media regularly receive hundreds, if not thousands, of 'Likes', 'Retweets', and 'Shares'.

She's very popular (and for good reason).



Here's the photograph that stopped me in my tracks-

This was my initial thought... *Wow! What a subtle use of light.*



I began to take in the “mysterious vibration” that sang through this image. The farmhouse appears to be abandoned (although I have no idea if it really is). The low camera angle, with the large out of focus elements in the foreground, makes the viewer feel as if they are peeking at this young girl. The dark clouds add an ominous Stephen King style- a “Children of the Corn” feeling. Then I focused in on the girl. She appears to be wearing a party dress. Her expression looks secretive... almost sad... as if she has something to hide... or something that she needs to escape from. The image is technically perfect.

Drossin creates high drama through camera placement, her choice of unusual composition, and her perfect timing with the blowing hair and fleeting expression.

I asked myself (and now I’ll ask you), when was the last time that a photograph caused you to stop and reflect so deeply upon it? Maybe for you, it’s not this image (although personally, I would hang this photograph as an art piece on my living room wall, and I would enjoy it every day for the rest of my life).

That is the mark of a great photograph.



It's not about the equipment. It doesn't (necessarily) rely on heavy editing. It creates an emotion (regardless of whether that emotion is good or bad). It tells a story. It engages us as viewers. We are forced to become part of what is being said (visually).

You don't just look at a Jessica Drossin photograph and say, "That's beautiful" or, "Great capture", or "Nice image".

Drossin forces us to dig deeper.

That is a rare talent in a photographer.


THE INTERVIEW



When Jessica agreed to do the interview with Photzy.com I almost fell out of my chair with happiness.

I can't remember the last time that I was so excited to dig into the thoughts of a fellow photographer and artist.

Let's get started-



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Kent DuFault- "Jessica, I've been singing the praises of your photography to the world. At some point, I'm going to ask you some questions about your techniques, but before we get into that, tell us- what makes you tick? You have such an amazing vision."


Jessica Drossin- "Thank you so much. It means a lot to me that people care about my work and want to share it with others. It's tremendously motivating to document a personal experience or idea and to have that resonate with others."

I am very lucky because, over the years, I've been able to wander around chasing various ideas. I was never one to concern myself overly with trying to stick to a particular style or point of view as I have a lot of different ideas on how a shot or concept should be conveyed. I often wonder if I would be further in my career if I stuck to one thing (like just photographing my children or doing fine art portraits, etc.), but I would be very dissatisfied. I think I stay inspired to keep working (and truly, I get more inspired with every passing year), because I don't limit myself. I have hundreds of ideas, big and small, that I want to work on, and my only issue is lack of time, never a lack of motivation.

It takes so little to get me almost overwhelmed with ideas, and it happens multiple times throughout the day. I listen to a song, hear a friend's story, see something out of my car window, think about a play on words, theorize about trying something new with light or challenging myself to mess around in a different way in editing; it all gets me excited. My issue is that I need to write more of these ideas down as they can be forgotten just as easily as they come to me. But if I had to choose the thing that motivates me the most, it is trying to connect with people. I'm not always delving into the happiest of emotions; sometimes my work is filled with melancholy and longing and fear and loneliness and it's harder to connect with people when you are asking them to be with you through these introspective moments. When people reach out to me and tell me that something I did touched them in a way that spoke to something deep inside them, it feels like I am doing something that is worthwhile. I put out a piece of my soul and they understood it in their own way and now we two strangers have a connection. We understand one another in a fleeting but profound way, and I keep working to make more connections, to make that connection deeper."



JD
Jessica Drossin



It's the kind of image that could inspire music, film, a short story -- it's just a brilliant piece of art.

KD- "Wow. That's really interesting. For you, your photography has a spiritual connection instead of a strictly visual one, and that connection isn't confined internally; you use it to reach out to others. That vibe (connection) to those who have viewed your work is so apparent on your social media. In fact, I'm one of them!

Your bio states that you hold a degree in Fine Art, and that you've been influenced by a number of famous photographers, painters, and illustrators. The image on page 4 (that I love so dearly), is a part of your series from Nebraska. It reminds me of an Andrew Wyeth painting entitled, 'Christina's World'. Does Andrew Wyeth influence your work? Did you pre-plan the image? Or, did it just happen?"

JD- "The name of that photo is 'Her World', and it was inspired by Andrew Wyeth's 'Christina's World'. Wyeth is, without a doubt, my favorite illustrator. There are a handful of images that are burned into my psyche and that is one of them. Wyeth created a powerful portrait that worked on so many levels, and the most compelling aspect to me is that you have a portrait that seems to be about one thing, but in fact, it's telling a very different story entirely. It's the kind of image that could inspire music, film, a short story -- it's just a

brilliant piece of art.

I didn't set out to do a take on 'Christina's World' in a pre-planned way, but there is something about the rural countryside, with its decaying farm homes, that speaks to me. You can drive in any direction and pass these rotting, worthless houses surrounded by crops.

Farming has changed tremendously over the past 40 years. Smaller farms are being gobbled up by larger ones, and the homes that once were vibrant and alive go silent. The children born there grow up and move away for opportunities elsewhere. And here I was, a product of this world, now living outside of it and seeing it as someone who loves it and also knows they can never go back, but they still feel a calling. As I drove through the countryside with my niece, the roots of my photograph, 'Her World', began to form in my mind."



KD- "I agree. Wyeth's paintings and illustrations inspire one to sit and contemplate the past. There are always thought provoking elements in his work, much like your photograph, 'Her World'. It's funny, I spent quite a bit of time wondering if that house was abandoned or not... I guess it is up to me, right?"

Much of your work has a fantasy element. We noticed in your Bio that you worked for ten years as the Creative Manager of Blizzard Entertainment Company. (For those readers who don't know Blizzard Entertainment- they are a major player in the development and distribution of fantasy games.) That had to be a really interesting job. What made you leave and turn to photography? Did your time there influence your photographic work?"

JD- "I really enjoyed working for Blizzard; my years there sharpened both my design and conceptual sensibilities. I enjoyed doing bold, grungy, artistic design work, which fit in well with my painting background. I started making my own textures and experimenting with different treatments in Photoshop while working on box cover designs. Blizzard was incredible in how they developed these immersive worlds with meticulous attention to both the big and the little things. They



were never sloppy. I was happy to work with them, but when I had my first child, something just changed in me. I lost my desire to do design work, and that kind of work demands dedication and passion. They were incredibly generous with allowing me to have a smooth transition, and I'll always be grateful for my experiences there. Brilliant people surrounded me, and it taught me a lot about how to craft a story and also how to conduct my business.

Regarding my more otherworldly work, it could be said that I bounce around a bit. I'm interested in documenting real life for a while, and then I get tired of reality and turn back into my imagination."

KD- "Many of your photographs are highly stylized. They utilize props, make-up, and unusual hair. Do you work by yourself, or with a team? Do you completely pre-visualize a shot, or do you start with an element and build from there?"

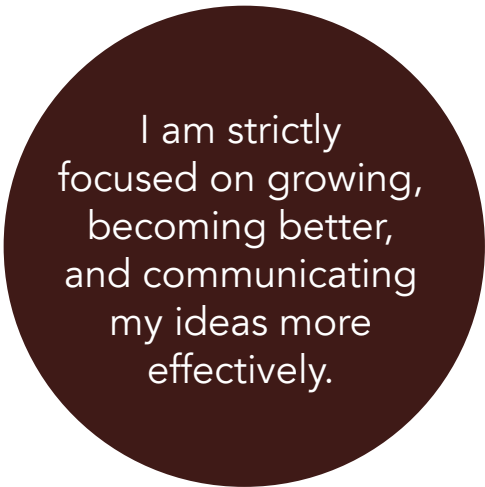
JD- "I think that I would enjoy working with a makeup/hair professional or a wardrobe person, but for whatever reason — and perhaps it's that I am secretly a control freak — I generally work alone. I am spontaneous, and I figure out things as I go along, either by watching braiding tutorials on YouTube or



relying on my past 8th grade sleepover make up application parties, ha-ha! I generally have a pretty strong vision in my head before a shoot, but often that idea evolves into something else when I'm in post. I am flexible, I enjoy playing and allowing for the unexpected."

KD- "I never knew 8th grade sleepover parties could be so beneficial! Tell us, what was it like going from (small town) Nebraska to Los Angeles? Once you decided to pursue photography, how did you go about making yourself known in a big market?"

JD- "I think I got into photography at a very interesting time, right as digital photography was taking off. I took traditional photography classes in college as a requirement for my degree in Fine Art. I had no compelling interest in pursuing it, as I was much more interested in creating with my hands in a tactile way. Photography was too clean and reality-based for me. With the advent of high-resolution digital cameras that all changed, and I was able to think in a much more painterly and experimental way. I began participating in online photography communities, and I found that people were interested in my experiments. I was home with a baby, burned out on graphic design,



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and I found it amazing that I could take an hour out of my day and express myself creatively. I think when you are motivated by love, joy, passion, all these great emotions, good things follow if you put your work out there and stand by it. I took photos only for myself, until people began to ask me to take photos of them and somehow word spread organically. My photography resources business started the same way. I initially made my own textures only for my personal use until people began asking if they could purchase them. It truly feels (sometimes) like I just follow my passion, and then as I walk down this path it keeps expanding."

KD- "Wow! You're inspiring. Now I love your work even more than I did before! Jessica, you are fun, and you're quite a celebrity on social media. How do you feel about all that attention? Is social media your primary tool for acquiring new work, or (as we old timers used to say) do you still schlep your book around?"

JD- "I do not have a book. I never had one for photography, only for design and illustration. It's kind of crazy. All my work has come to me via my website portfolio or social media. I've been hired for some pretty large gigs based only on what people see online. It's incredible, I feel very lucky.

I have a love/hate relationship with social media. I am grateful to be able to connect with people who are interested in seeing my work, but social media is also a brutal arena. And when people say or do things that are mean-spirited, or unethical, it hurts me the same as it would anyone else. I am not someone who thinks that just because I have a certain number of Facebook likes that it intrinsically makes me (or my work) any better than anyone else. I am strictly focused on growing, becoming better, and communicating my ideas more effectively and eloquently. I love feeling supported, but everything in life cuts both ways. It can get overwhelming for me; sometimes even the good stuff can be overwhelming. I work very hard to create a "safe" happy place for myself where I work hard to focus on the positive — the friends I've made, the opportunities I've been given, the causes I've been able to support."





KD- “Words of wisdom there. I love your analogy of social media being a brutal arena. It’s so open to everyone commenting, good or bad- depending on his or her mood.

After viewing a variety of your work, it seems like a true statement to say that you prefer shooting children and women. Is that correct? Do you shoot weddings or commercial work? Or, do you primarily produce your own fine art and then try to find a market for those images? Your bio states that you’ve produced book covers for clients from around the world. Are these commissioned? Or, do you sell your fine art images as stock photography?”

JD- “I shoot a variety of people, but I don’t necessarily have permission to post all my projects to social media, but it is true; I am most often hired to photograph women or children. I think I built much of my portfolio on photos of children (taking pictures of my kids or their school friends) and personal projects (where I cast female models because they were essentially portraying a part of me). It’s like the theory that in our dreams, every character is actually a part of the dreamer’s personality. My models are themselves, but they are also a part of me, and most of my stories are told from a feminine perspective. When you build a certain body of work, you get more of it.



I do not shoot weddings generally. I have made a few exceptions under the right circumstances, but my style of fine art editing, and frankly, my attention span, does not lend itself to delivering 2500 images. I prefer to do bridal sessions where we focus on creating a series of fine art portraits.

Over the years, I have created a library of images, and I license them through an agency. I also accept commissions to make specific images for print. I've worked for several entertainment companies: creating images for films, TV pilots, and albums. I had a career highlight in 2011, when I was able to go to Prague to document the making of the film "Red Tails" soundtrack with George Lucas for Lucas Arts. My career came full circle there in Prague when he was unhappy with the Red Tails film logo design, and I was able to slip into my old role as an art director and worked with him to create the film's logo...

I am still pinching myself!

In regard to fine art prints, it is something I intend to do but I have not yet found a printer/distributor that I feel comfortable using. It's a goal of mine for 2015, particularly since I recently purchased a print from an artist I admire. I'd love to be able to give someone the same satisfaction I feel every time I walk by that print."

KD- "The image above was created with an iPhone. It's part of your series from the beach in Florida. Your work is exemplary, no matter what tool you're using. I'm going to ask you about equipment in a moment, but before I do; do you find it difficult to adjust your creative vision based on the tool in your hands? Obviously, an iPhone can't capture the same image that a DSLR camera can. Yet, your style follows through- no matter what camera is in your hands. Can you try and describe to us how you do that?"

JD- "We photographers get offended when someone says, 'Great photo! What camera did you use?' And of course, it's not the camera but the photographer taking the picture. BUT, all the same, we get a little comfortable with our high megapixel resolution and fancy lenses. We can slip into a mentality that camera phones are just for selfies and documenting our lunch. That shouldn't be the case; a photographer should strive to make compelling photographs in all instances. I love the spirit of Instagram -- camera phone shots edited on the phone -- but I believe we should take fewer photos of our salads, and instead ask ourselves, 'What is going on around me that is truly worth documenting and sharing?' I don't pretend to always get it right on my phone, but I am trying to rewire my mindset about how I experience my everyday moments. And frankly, if you are following me on Instagram, I should be courteous and try not to not waste your time with meaningless images, that were thoughtlessly taken."

KD- "Well, your enthusiasm and dedication certainly shine in your iPhone photography. Okay. Now for all the folks out there who really like to hear about gear; what camera system(s) do you use? What are your favorite lenses? What kind of lighting equipment do you use? And on the editing side- what does Jessica Drossin prefer: Photoshop? Lightroom? Something else? A little of everything?"



JD- "I shoot with a Canon 5D Mark iii. My favorite lenses are the 85mm f/1.2 L Series, the 50mm f/1.4 Sigma Art, the 16-35mm f/2.8 L Series, and the 70-200mm f/2.8 L Series. I do not use any lighting equipment, although I'd like to learn to use lighting at some point. I am mostly a Photoshop editor, but I am learning Adobe Camera Raw. Until about 6 months ago, I was shooting only .JPG, but I am slowly branching out to using RAW images as well."






KD- "Interesting. You use only existing light in your photography, yet many of your images have a highly stylized lighting scheme. Do you create the lighting effects in your editing software?"

JD- "Yes, my Foundations action set is heavily based on my techniques of shaping natural light. I like to think of my original .JPG image as a blueprint, and I work to carve it out, to give it shape and dimension and mood in post-production. I really like the look of stylized lighting, but I am a quick and impulsive shooter. I like doing 15 completely different things in an hour, something that wouldn't be possible if I had to lug around and set up lights."

KD- "Jessica, you've developed a business in which you're selling actions, textures, and overlays. From an outside point of view, it appears that this business is thriving. Is this where you put that fine art background to work? Many Photzy readers are very new to photography. They may not even have a clear understanding of what these products are and how they might benefit from them. Can you tell us- What are they? How do they work? How might Photzy readers use them? And, where we can find them on the Internet?"



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JD- "A lot of people are quick to dismiss digital editing and talk only about getting things right in camera. And I agree wholeheartedly that you need to have a good original to get a great final image. But, I think what people forget is that photographers (since the camera was invented) have been processing their images to stylize and perfect them in the darkroom.

Today's photography is the same, but we're not using darkrooms, but rather computers.

Over the years, I have developed tools that help me add depth, color and mood to a photograph- to push it into the realm of being fine art photography (instead of simply pure digital photography). I enjoy sharing these tools and seeing how others use them. I find it inspiring to be connected with people in this way and people continually surprise and amaze me with the ingenious ways they use my tools.

My actions, overlays and textures don't 'make' the photo for you, but if you have a vision in your head, they can help you shape your image by providing timesaving shortcuts: you know, Photoshop tricks that might take years for you to discover on your own, and the inspiration that comes with experimentation.

Actions are simple 'scripts' that I write for you in Photoshop. You simply load them in, and a menu comes up with different options like 'Add Warmth', and then you simply push a button and the action warms up your image. These changes are created as separate layers in Photoshop so you can easily adjust and customize the effects. Actions take a lot of the time and learning curve out of Photoshop because you simply 'order' what you want instead of trying to create specific looks from scratch.

Textures are simply .JPG files that are placed directly on top of the original image and then placed in the desired blending mode. Textures can be more time intensive, both to learn how to apply and to integrate successfully; but there is no better way to add an artistic feel to an image. Textures work to transform a standard photo into something that feels like a painting.

Overlays are similar to textures (in that they are placed directly on top of the original image). An overlay could be an effect, like a lens flare or a light leak, or it could introduce an entirely new photographic element such as a cloud, bird, or leaf. In the snowy photo (displayed above), the little red leaf is an overlay — it was added to the image after the shoot, in Photoshop.



I have a store (www.jessicadrossin.com/store) with all my products. The store is a part of my website. Every product that I sell has a .PDF tutorial, and I've created free YouTube videos that demonstrate how to use my products. I also offer freebie textures on my website for those who have never tried a texture and are interested in playing."

KD- "Wow! That's great information."

Jessica, you've been an awesome guest. We wish you all the success in the world. You can count on the fact that we will be following your career. Thank you for giving us this interview and sharing your wonderful vision and philosophies on photography, art, and the use of social media. You've given us a lot to think about."

JD- "I am honored you asked, and humbled that you like my work. Thank you."

About Jessica Drossin



Besides being an internationally acclaimed award-winning photographer, Jessica Drossin is a happily married stay-at-home mom with two active boys that keep her busy. She feels very blessed in her life, and is thankful that she can do what she loves for a living.

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