

Siminou Interview

March 1, 2007



Calla Lilies #36, 2007

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interview with Huntington Witherill

Siminou • Interview • 2007

with Huntington Witherill



"Ferns, Roche Harbor, WA, 2006"

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The following interview took place between February 24, 2007, and March 1, 2007, by and between Becca Siminou and Huntington Witherill. While attending a masters degree program at Academy Art University, Ms. Siminou conducted this written interview with Witherill as part of a class project. The interview is reproduced herein in its entirety with permission of the interviewer.

I understand that you started photographing as a child while camping with your family. I also read that you focused on photography in 1970. Was there something or someone specific that started the process at that time?

I actually did not begin photography until 1970, and by then I was 20 years old. However, the thing that had inspired me to initially take up photography was remembrances of visual experiences I had enjoyed while on camping trips as a child. The whole family would pile into a station wagon, usually at 3:00am-4:00am on the day of departure, and we were all told to "go back to sleep" because it would be "a long trip." Of course, being a child I was never able to sleep in those instances due to the anticipation of new and exciting experiences. So, I would pretend to be asleep while keeping a surreptitious eye out the window, taking in the "new world" as it passed by, mile after mile. I saw a number of glorious sunrises in this manner and I guess those experiences had

a lasting effect upon me. The visual beauty was often extraordinary. It was the memories of those scenes of exhilarating visual beauty that eventually inspired me to take up photography in 1970.

Which photographers have inspired/mentored you the most in your photography?

Steve Crouch and Al Weber were my most important mentors. Steve, up until the time of his death in the late 1970's, was the one photographer with whom I had probably spent more time than any other. He used to show up at my house nearly every day for "tea" in the afternoon. We would talk incessantly about photography and he always took an active interest in what I was doing. Al Weber was also a very important teacher and mentor. I met Al at the Ansel Adams Yosemite Workshop in the summer of 1970. I think Al sensed that I was really serious about becoming a photographer and he offered me encouragement and constructive criticism, both of which I badly needed. Al and I have remained good friends and to this day I continue to find that I still have much to learn from him.

You mentioned that Al Weber offered you encouragement and constructive criticism. How important is it for those who are passionate about photography and who want to exhibit and publish their work, to learn from and work with a professional photographer like yourself?

Obviously, the more capable one's teachers are, the faster and more thoroughly one can absorb most any pursuit. However, it's important to keep in mind that the "best" photographers don't necessarily make the "best" teachers. Sometimes they do. But often they don't. I rate Al Weber as one of the best photography teachers working today. While he is clearly able to disseminate a high level of instruction related to the craft of photography, he also remains steadfastly adamant about teaching his students to photograph as they would, rather than teaching them to photograph as he does. It's too easy to fall into the trap of unintentionally encouraging your students to mimic your own approach. The student then ends up being someone else's clone. So yes, I would say it's absolutely important to seek out the very best teachers you can, but based solely upon their teaching skills.

What was one of the greatest pieces of advice you were given by your mentors early on? And, how does it affect you today?

Steve Crouch once offered the following advice: "If you are enamored with the work you are

Siminou • Interview • 2007

page two

currently doing you are on the road to being a successful photographer. If you are equally enamored with that same work, next year, you're just spinning your wheels". The advice has caused me to continually strive to improve my photography and not to become too comfortable or set in my ways.

What would you define as being your passion in photography?

My passion continues to be the actual "process" of living my life as a photographer. I find the most rewarding aspects of being a fine art photographer to be largely unrelated to the actual photographs that I've produced over the years. It is the act of living one's life as an artist and a photographer that continues to fuel the passion. One of the things that most fascinates and interests me about art is that *no one* will ever be able to quite figure it all out in a single life time. Being an artist and photographer encompasses a life long learning experience: a journey, if you will. It is that journey of self exploration and visual discovery that holds the greatest interest and promise, far more so than any specific goals and/or individual photographs that I may have set out to accomplish.

What have been the trials and tribulations: the greatest challenges of your photography career?

Like most any other photographer or artist, it is that ultimate and ongoing uncertainty regarding the efficacy of one's work that will continue to challenge. It is for this reason that I place so much importance on the process of *being* an artist, rather than relying on the actual *results* of being an artist. Unquestionably, photography remains an unshakable passion for me. I will continue to be a photographer regardless of the relative success or failure of my photographs.

When was it that your work was first discovered in terms of selling prints, showing in galleries, interviews with publications, etc.? And, is there anything special that you did to start this process?

I was involved in several group shows in the early 1970's. Galleries in the Monterey area would mount exhibits featuring groups of local photographers and I was invited on a few occasions to participate with a print or two. I had my first solo exhibition in 1975, at the Shado Gallery in Portland, Oregon. At one point I visited with Dick Garrod, a well known photographer here in the Monterey area. Being a great admirer of Dick's work, I had put together a small group of prints which he

graciously agreed to critique for me. At the time, I asked him if he thought I might be ready for a one-person show. He suggested I contact Shedrick Williams, who owned a photography gallery in the Portland area. "Shad" would often agree to show the work of unknown photographers. I made the trip to Portland and had my first one-person show there several months later.

Where do you think you have most succeeded and/or failed?

As I suspect might well be the case with other photographers, I have likely succeeded more so with my photography skills than with my business skills. Let's face it— fine art photography is not always the most lucrative profession one could choose. Fortunately, I've managed to rate my own successes based upon my continuing passion for, and commitment to, the medium itself, together with an ongoing work ethic that helps to encourage my photography to continually evolve, and hopefully improve.

Do you remember your first images and reactions when shooting digital? And, when you started shooting digital, did you have the idea of making straight images only?

To be honest, the initial impetuous for trying a digital approach was based upon the notion that by doing so I could avoid the most dreaded task in photography: spotting prints. I absolutely hated spotting prints! I thought a digital approach might relieve me of this unwanted chore. I first attempted digital in 1991. At the time, the tools and materials were relatively crude and it was not until the mid to late 1990's that the approach began to prove workable. I did initially intend to make only straight images but when I began to discover the real power of the computer, as a visual tool, I realized that the whole notion of what a photograph could be was about to change.

How did you come up with the idea of combining different images, layers, and other elements to produce your Photo Synthesis images?

The *Photo Synthesis* series began as a visual experiment using the computer in what I believe to be one of its most capable roles: that of being a visual synthesizer. When I was attending college as a music major during the late 1960's, I had an opportunity to work with sound synthesizers. Remember the Moog Synthesizer? Using sine waves as building blocks I would attempt to construct, piece-by-piece, full orchestrations of musical compositions with a synthesizer. Using what I had learned from those experiences and beginning around 2002, I started to view the

Siminou • Interview • 2007

page three

computer and Photoshop as a sort of parallel to the sound synthesizer. I then began to build layered compositions of form, line and color using Photoshop and some of the same conceptual principles I had employed when using the synthesizer.

For many years you were mainly a B&W photographer. How has the transition from B&W to color been in terms of those changes?

For me, the transition to color seemed almost effortless. I had always had an idea that I wanted to do some of my work in color. And I also had a pretty good idea about what I wanted to achieve in terms of the color itself. But, the particular color palette I had in mind always seemed a bit out of reach for conventional color films and printing papers. However, with the advent and ongoing improvements to the digital approach and most especially with the vast improvements in digital printing processes achieved during the late 1990's, I was finally able to quickly and easily transition from black and white to color.

In everything I've read about you, 'light' was considered the most important element of your photography. I fully agree with you. Do you feel that the 'light' works the same when using the digital camera as with a film camera? Or, have you had to alter your techniques?

The tools one might use to record light will always remain irrelevant to the nature of the light that is being recorded. It matters not what tool is used. A photographer must always pay particular attention to the light. Light is the predominant subject in every photograph. And yes, I believe the light itself works the same with digital as it does with any other tool. Of course one must employ different techniques for controlling the light depending upon the type of tool being used. Nevertheless, you are recording the very same light regardless of what process is employed. It is the photographer's job to translate the light that is present in any scene, through a specified set of tools and materials, and finally into a finished photograph. How one accomplishes that translation becomes the crux of the photographic problem and solution.

How difficult was the transition from the 5x7 view camera to the medium format and finally the digital camera? What is the equipment you are currently using?

Transitioning from a view camera to medium format and finally to 35mm digital (currently, a

Canon 5D) has, like everything else in life, entailed a series of trade-offs. Every format has its own strengths and weaknesses. I believe it's a matter of using each format and approach to its best advantages. For example, the great detail and tonal clarity that can be easily achieved using a view camera is off-set by the fact that a smaller camera can be used with far greater spontaneity. Thus, I would not routinely attempt to photograph a Formula One race using a view camera (though I actually did try this several years ago!). And conversely, I would not routinely use a 35mm camera if I wished to photograph the grand landscape with the intentions of achieving the same kinds of detail and tonal clarity that one might expect when using a view camera.

Do you miss film at all? Is there any aspect of film that you would say is still better than digital? Or has the technology surpassed film now?



"Iris #1, 2002"

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Siminou • Interview • 2007

page four

I don't miss anything about my photographic past. I'm always most excited about what comes next. And, I wouldn't characterize any aspect of either conventional or digital photography as being, in any way, better or worse. Again, each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses. It becomes purely a personal judgment call as to whether one approach is somehow better than another. Fortunately, art is all about judgment calls. Keep in mind that regardless of what you produce (in terms of actual photographs) and/or what tools you use to produce them, many of your photographs will simply not be of particular interest to many of those with whom they are shared. We all have different tastes and that's a good thing because it insures ongoing variety and vitality in art.

Do you have a favorite image from each of your series?

I am typically most interested in my recent work, regardless of the series or approach. I do have favorites but they inevitably change from day to day. And, I do work in an ongoing way with almost all of the series I've explored over the years. Finding a new way to work is somewhat analogous to adding a new color to one's palette. By adding the new color it doesn't mean that I would necessarily discontinue working with all of the previously used colors. For example, I still continue to photograph the landscape in black and white as I did when I first started photography. Undoubtedly though, my favorite image will most always be that next image.

When talking about your favorite images you mentioned that you still continue to photograph the landscape in black and white as you did when you first started photography. Because you are now shooting with a digital camera, are you shooting directly in black and white, or are you converting color images to black and white in post-production?

With the digital camera I am converting color images to black and white in post-production. Many digital cameras do have the ability to shoot directly in black and white. But the advantages of shooting in color and then converting to black and white, after the fact, are numerous. For example, by shooting in color you have the ability to selectively filter your image before you make the conversion to black and white. Thus (as a hypothetical) you could filter the sky in a landscape using a red filter while at the same time employing a green filter for the land.

What is your digital creative process now? Are you still using the older Photoshop program?

One of the great nuisances of a digital existence is the planned obsolescence of the tools. Digital

tools and materials continue to change just like the seasons. I have recently upgraded (for the fourth or fifth time, now) most all of my tools and materials. I am (this week) using a Mac G5, System OSX 10.4.8. And for software, I currently use Adobe Lightroom 1.0 and Photoshop CS2. And I'm printing with an Epson Stylus Pro 7800 printer. Check with me next week and I'll give you an update!

How often do you travel to photograph landscape images? And how do you chose which photographs will stay as natural, simply touched up images, and which photographs will be used for your Photosynthesis series?

The Photosynthesis series is done strictly within my studio using botanical specimens as subject matter. So, when I am out in the field I would likely not be producing material for that particular series. However, I always like to remain open to whatever a given photographic situation has to offer. I try not to limit my approach in terms of either subject matter or treatment while I'm in the field. And though I travel less than I used to, I still find that I am "on the road" at least one month each year.

Since we have not been able to live 50-100 years beyond the inception of inkjet printers in order to see the end results, are you concerned at all about the lasting quality of prints made with inkjet printers?

I have no lingering concerns about the archival nature of digital prints made with today's inkjet printers. From a relative standpoint, pigment ink prints are now capable of lasting far longer than many of the most widely accepted conventional print processes. And in addition to the currently published statistics regarding specific print longevity, which now approach 200-300 years, I always like to keep in mind a piece of sharp witted advice passed along by Steve Crouch. He said: *The nicest thing about most photographs is this: if you give them enough time... they will fade!*

Do you feel that the overall quality of peoples images has lessened because of digital?

No. I don't believe that the overall quality of photographic images has, in any way, lessened because of digital. I think the relative percentage of successful photographs— by comparison to the total number of photographs actually being produced— has remained pretty much the same regardless of the approach. It is the sheer numbers of total images produced digitally that has skyrocketed. Thus, while there are now many more successful photographs being produced by

Siminou • Interview • 2007

page five

digital means, there are far more bad photographs being produced digitally, as well.

Have you noticed the print sizes increasing due to the capabilities of inkjet printers, versus printing in a conventional darkroom? How do you feel about large prints? Are you making larger prints?

I have indeed noticed that digital prints tend to be larger in size by comparison to conventional prints. And I think there are a number of factors involved. One has to do with the fact that unlike conventional photography, a digital photograph (assuming the pixel per inch resolution remains the same) will actually increase in detail and clarity as the print grows in terms of its physical size. It is actually more difficult to produce small digital prints than it is to produce large ones. And no, I don't personally have any problem with large prints. At least, not until it comes time to carry them around and ship them from place to place! I do have a couple of larger print sizes available in my pigment ink editions, but I still predominately produce the same sized prints as when I was printing in a conventional darkroom.

I have been wondering for a while about posters versus inkjet prints. Posters are images mass produced on a printing press (and considered affordable for the average person). Inkjet prints can also be mass produced. How do you separate the two and give more value to the prints you make?

English can be such a tricky language! There are a number of terms you've used within this question that, depending upon how they are defined, could significantly influence the outcome of my response. So first, let's attempt to define those terms.

"Poster." In the context of this question, I define a poster as an offset lithographic print that is mass produced (usually in quantities of 1,000-10,000 posters at a time) by means of a mechanical printing press, using ink on paper. And for purposes of this discussion let's assume that the printing press is using dye-based inks as this is, most often, the way posters are produced. And, let's also assume that 2,000 will be the average number of prints produced of a given image. Conventional posters normally sell in the retail market for around \$10.-\$25. Nevertheless, let's also arbitrarily assume a fixed retail price of \$25. per poster, and a print size of 16"x20".

"Inkjet Print." I define an inkjet print as a photomechanical reproduction achieved by means of an inkjet printer (most commonly an Epson Inkjet printer) employing ink on paper. And in this context

let's assume that pigment-based inks are being used as this has become the standard for inkjet prints. Inkjet prints are normally produced in quantities of 1-200 prints and are sold in the retail market for anywhere from \$50.- \$5,000., and up. But here, let's arbitrarily assume a fixed price of \$250. per print, a print size of 16"x20", and 50 as the average number of prints being produced of a given image.

"Value." This is a tough one! Intrinsic value? Aesthetic value? Monetary value? You can begin to see that it's a bit like comparing apples and oranges to try to relate and compare these two printing processes. Nevertheless, given the above definitions (together with an attempt to contrast some varying forms of "value") I would speculate the following:

The retail market for a \$25. poster is a completely different market than that of a \$250. inkjet print. At the same time I would argue that both of these markets are considered as affordable to the average person despite the fact that they each attract a different type of buyer. With respect to the mass produced nature of each process, the term: "mass produced" is of course a relative



"Railing, Fort Stevens, WA, 2006"

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Siminou • Interview • 2007

page six

term. In this case the relevant numbers do not justify comparison. The time required to produce a single 16"x20" inkjet print (once everything has been set up) is roughly 1/2 hour. A printing press can produce 2,000 posters (once it has been set up) in roughly 2 hours. For an inkjet printer to produce 2,000 prints of that same image would require in the neighborhood of 1,000 hours. (That's 125, eight-hour days!) With respect to the lasting quality (the archival nature) of each process, a poster (depending upon how it is stored and displayed) will usually last from 1-5 years before it has significantly faded. On the other hand, an inkjet print can last (depending upon how it is stored and displayed) for upwards of 100-300 years. And of course, with respect to fading characteristics, it's good to keep in mind that projections regarding the archival nature of any artwork will be subject to the inexact nature of archival science. We can only speculate about true print longevity because there are so many unknown variables. Nevertheless, it's clear that an inkjet print will far outlast a poster.

With respect to the aesthetic value (the "look") of the two processes, I'd say the two approaches are roughly comparable and depend largely upon the skill and decision making of the person who is actually operating the inkjet printer or printing press. That being said, any aesthetic evaluations would be based solely upon one's personal opinions and thus, conclusive aesthetic determinations can not be made. Giving consideration to all of the above, the separate and distinct nature of these two processes seems unequivocal.

Finally, when evaluating any process it's a good idea to take into account the realities of one's ability to actually sell the work that is being produced. If you, as an individual photographer, have direct access to a market in which you could expect to sell 2,000 prints of a single image, then producing a poster would make sense. However, absent the ability to market and sell those 2,000 posters, it doesn't make much practical and/or economic sense for you to produce your own work in poster form as a principal means of selling your photographic images.

Is there any encouraging advice you could give to photographers who are just starting out about how to have their images shown in galleries and/or published?

The best way to initiate exhibitions and publications of your work is to do your best to introduce the work to as many galleries and other potential venues as possible. You must not be afraid that your work will be rejected. In fact, you can count on the fact that it will indeed be rejected at least half of

the time! However, if you remain patient and are willing to weather those rejections and continue to seek out a gallery that shares your own enthusiasm for your work, you will eventually find a venue for that work. It's only a matter of time and of not being timid in your willingness to expose your work to all possible venues. It's also important to exhibit what I refer to as the "4-P's". Be **Polite**, act **Professionally**, be **Persistent** and most of all, be **Patient**. If a gallery owner and/or curator does not express great enthusiasm for your work, don't waste your time attempting to talk them into carrying that work. You may well convince them (through intimidation) to accept the work, but their lack of enthusiasm will only serve to insure that your prints will be summarily tucked away in a drawer, never to see the light of day. Move along to the next gallery and when that spark of honest enthusiasm for your work arises, you *and* the gallery will know it.

What are your feelings about where photography is headed?

I believe that we are currently living in one of the most exciting times in the history of photography. With the advent of digital processes, photographers are no longer confined to producing photographs that fit a 19th Century definition of what a photograph is, can, or should be. The potential for growth in the medium has never been greater. As photographers we are indeed fortunate to be involved in the medium at such an opportune moment in its history. Where photography is actually headed is anyone's guess. But the fact that the art is now assured of tremendous growth and change in the coming years is to be both celebrated and cherished.



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