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An Interview with Julieanne Kost - By John Paul Caponigro

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Exhibited nationally, Julieanne Kost's work has been widely published. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the University of California at Davis and an Associate Art Degree in Fine Art Photography from Foothill Collage. Julieanne has worked for Adobe Systems for the past 8 years as a graphic designer, technical support specialist, photographer, and currently serves as the graphic arts evangelist. She frequently teaches courses in Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and ImageReady at distinguished fine art and photography workshops (including Santa Fe Workshops, Anderson Ranch Arts Center, and Toscana Photographic Workshops), prominent industry trade shows, and conferences across the United States and Canada (including Seybold, MacWorld and PhotoPlus East).

In her work, Julieanne Kost is able to combine a passion for photography and a mastery of digital imaging techniques. "For Kost, a computer isn't merely a shortcut for what is possible with a camera. Instead, it's about exploring what's possible in no other medium and taking advantage of the flexibility and options for creative exploration. In short, the computer has been properly relegated, it's just another tool. However, with so many options for exploration, it is here that discipline becomes part of the challenge. The paint is never dry, the exposure is never fixed, and the print is never final. Here, the art is in knowing when to stop. It's about realizing when you've said what you set out to say.

With a degree in psychology, she finds within herself, both literally and figuratively, the raw components of visual emotion. For Kost self-portraiture extends to exploring the inner workings of her body. Texture and a scar combine to yield the visual sensation of the wound that caused it. Since physical pain cannot be "remembered" the same way it was felt, her images become visual placeholders found in the challenge of approaching a clearer more holistic perception. Her explorations run the gamut, from the commonplace to the exotic, from the mundane to the extraordinary. Everything is a component of a larger message. The individual images are snippets of an emotion, a reaction, or a sensation. Kost's work is an exploration of the sum of these parts - texture, light, shadow, and raw emotion."

John Paul Caponigro Our first memories can be so important. What's your first memory of photography?

Julieanne Kost I can't quite remember if it was my mother or father that first introduced me to photography. Growing up, my dad - a photography hobbyist - converted the laundry room into a darkroom. I'll never forget the magic of watching a photograph come to life in the developer tray. However, I'll also always remember how painful it was to spot prints. The fact that there was a lint trap right next to the enlarger made it seem like dust was magnetically attracted to my negatives. I remember my mother too, using the darkroom to create the Kodaliths she needed to expose silk screens that she used for her art. They both had a big influence on me.

I remember hating to develop film. I was always afraid I'd ruin it somehow. The knowledge that you could never go back and take the same photo twice, especially when your parents were doing the driving was quite daunting.

The first roll of film that I remember shooting was of a ghost town in Nevada. My parents were always trying to show us as much of our surroundings as they could. The camera gave me the incentive to try to capture part of that experience forever. I remember constantly looking for the photo that neither my mom nor dad would shoot.

JPC As we all see differently, photography is different for everyone. What is it that first attracted you to photographic vision? Has that changed or stayed the same for you?

> **JK** I have always tried to capture what other people might overlook. It was always a challenge to go to the same location as my mom and dad, at the time, I didn't even realize how many other photographers were there as well, and try to come up with something unique. I still enjoy taking images that other people might not see. I always challenge myself to try to capture an image when I'm with other people and then have them ask, "Where did you shoot that?"
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> Throughout my images, I have also tried to find simplicity within chaos. From my first roll of film I can see my attempt to isolate some part of the world that I wanted to capture while deliberately ignoring others. The challenge was to break it down into the simplest of elements, isolating it from its surroundings and evaluate its own value.
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> In the past five years, the images that I take have changed dramatically. I used to try to take the "perfect" image in camera. Today, as a result of the incredible power that the computer and Adobe Photoshop have given me, I see potential for an image in almost everything I look at. I no longer wait for the "perfect" photographic opportunity; I look for anything that evokes an emotional response in me. Sometimes I'm not even sure what composite illustration I will use the image in when I take it. It comes to me later when I look at it again and realize the reason that it evoked such an emotion.
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> My earlier photography was an attempt to capture what is beautiful. Today, I make images that make me look inside my self and ask questions, that stir emotions, and reach across both the conscious and unconscious mind.

JPC I find exactly the same thing. While the traditional technique and strategies of image composition are incredibly important foundations for me, I find I constantly have to reevaluate them, sometimes repurposing them, sometimes abandoning them altogether. Some of your imagery looks conventionally straight; some of it looks digitally manipulated. Do you find it helpful for you to work in both ways at once?

> **JK** I find that a computer is a tool in some part of the process for all of my images. However, there is a definite difference between my digital images and my traditional photography. With my traditional work, I typically mimic the same adjustments that can be done in the darkroom. For my digital images, I composite multiple images in a manner that I could never accomplish traditionally.
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> Sometimes I take photos and sometimes I "make" photos. With the earlier work, I found my subjects and tried to capture them. I have a never-ending appreciation for the complexities of nature. I don't feel that I can make anything that is more beautiful than what nature provides, my only hope is to try to capture it's beauty and subtlety.
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> With my digital work, although I am still taking photographs to begin with, I feel that in the finished work, I have made a photograph. Or, rather, the definition of "photography" might need to change a bit. What was formerly only possible with cameras and darkrooms and filters and backdrops, must now be extended to include a computer. Perhaps this difference comes from the fact that when I take traditional photographs, I don't physically arrange a scene or alter the objects or manipulate the light. I "capture" photographs. Sometimes I am not even conscious of where they are taking me at the time of compositing. In school, I studies psychology and realized the importance of letting go of what you think of, to be real, in the world, and explore the unknown.

JPC Clearly it's an impulse I share. I find switching between the two modes of perception and creation brings a new clarity and a fresh insight into the nature and ways of each. Oscillating back and forth between the two shatters my biases and prejudices about what each is and isn't, what each does and doesn't do. That confrontation clarifies my intentions. It's challenging, refreshing, and inspiring.

> **JK** I do like being able to go back and forth, depending on my mood. I think it must have something to do with being a Gemini. I never saw the computer or Photoshop as threatening to my photography. I try not to think of any new technology or technique in that manner. Instead, I try to embrace all of the tools that are available to create images. I believe that the more tools you have at your disposal the more options you have and the more creative you can be. I'm not saying that everyone has to know all of the tools, just don't eliminate a tool because you don't know about it. Try it. If it fits your work, you'll continue to use it.

JPC That's great advice. It's always easier to criticize what you don't know. Technical issues aside, many aesthetic pitfalls await the artist who decides to work digitally. I think one of the biggest challenges one has to overcome is learning not to get completely carried away. A technique, a way of making images, can easily usurp a vision, a way of seeing. Restraint may be our single most useful asset when working digitally. With so much power, with so many options at our disposal, I think clarifying and maintaining a vision remains the single greatest challenge when working digitally. How do you personally approach this problem?

> **JK** I believe that as long as you keep true to your vision, you'll know when an image is complete. However, when you're trying to learn a new tool, especially one that is as robust as Photoshop, it's hard to stay focused. When I first started using a computer, my biggest pitfall was trying to make exciting images out of boring ones. I can't tell you the amount of time that I spent working with my "seconds" trying to fix them. I finally discovered that if the content or idea wasn't in the original image, no amount of digital work satisfied my vision. When I finally began shooting images with composites in mind, everything changed. This was the same feeling that I had when I knew enough about the camera to use it as a tool. It's the freedom of mastering the technology and moving on to explore the creative freedom that it empowers you with. Of course, the computer is not the right tool for every one or every job. I don't use the same brush to spot a negative as I do to paint my house, if a better way exists to create an effect that I am after and it has nothing to do with the computer, I do it that way.

JPC Are there other challenges that you've encountered as a result of working digitally?

> **JK** Absolutely, if we think back even five years ago to the speed of computers, the output options that were readily available, and the cost of investment, well, lets just say that we've come a long way. All of the images that I did five years ago now need to be rebuilt at higher resolution, but at the same time I can work in a color managed work flow. So although there are always tradeoffs, I know that it's worth it.
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> With digital imaging, there's a barrier between your brain and the result. In the tangible world, a pencil stroke is very organic and responds to your hand perfectly. In the case of digital imaging, a Mouse, or even a digitizing tablet, is a bit of an insulator to the creative process. It's like describing to someone how to draw something. I do miss the hands on process in the darkroom, but it would be hard for me to give up the precision of tonal control that I can achieve with the computer. Not to mention the one time removal of dust!

JPC I don't miss spotting either. I've heard some photographers say they do. I don't believe them. When people talk about the hands on quality of photography being lost when working digitally I sympathize but my first impulse is to recommend they try painting. In comparison, photography is very hands off. Do you ever think it's ironic to be using an "objective" medium like photography to portray what's highly "subjective"?

> **JK** I have never tried to make anyone believe that my photographs are or are not objective in nature. In fact, I don't believe that there is such a thing as an objective photograph. Every photographer brings with him/her a biased view of the world. With the photograph they take, they project their views. What they choose to include in a photograph, as well as what they choose to leave out, is as important as when they take the image. They choose the angle, the equipment, the film, the shutter speed. It's all subjective and reflects their experience of the moment. As human beings, every one of us is uniquely shaped both genetically and environmentally, making this bias unavoidable.
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> Whether or not my images are created on the computer, I hope, is not the point. It's the final image and the impact that it has on others that is important to me. In my images, I attempt to show a vision whose contents have an impact on the viewer. The computer helps me to accomplish this. Of course I enjoy when that reaction is the same one that I was trying to provoke, but other times, the enjoyment or satisfaction comes from the unique experience that the viewer has. The composite work can be interpreted in many ways. I couldn't expect everyone to have the same response. It would be so boring if we did.

JPC Your comment about every photograph being biased strikes home for me. Seen from one perspective, one could see the process of making the subjective visible as more "truthful" than attempting to eliminate or hide the subjective nature of the photographs we make in so

called "objective" documents. I mean no disrespect to documentary photography, I'm simply trying to highlight that objectivity is extremely hard, if not ultimately impossible, to achieve. The tool used does not supply objectivity and similarly one's method does not guarantee it. Objectivity is approached by degrees and with great effort. I see the increased availability of digital technology not as a challenge to documentary photography but rather as a challenge to culture to become more aware of the process of journalism, the nature of the documents created by it, and our own interpretive processes. I think the cultivation of this awareness if far more important than the maintenance of a comfortable myth of objectivity. After all "straight" photographs can be made to lie, some call it propaganda, some call it misinformation. How do you feel being a part of the process of this important cultural dialog?

JK I'm encouraged that the possibilities in digital technology challenge us to become more involved and aware of the images that we see and that help to shape our view of the world. I am energized by those possibilities but - and this is the telling part - that I still find it hard to talk about my work. The methods are easy. The content is trickier. I appreciate when people question images and look at them with a more skeptical or questioning eye. It promotes dialog, the exchange of new ideas, and the destruction of assumptions.

Documentary photographs, by nature are different. There needs to remain a distinction between images that are manipulated and those that are not. By manipulated, I mean making changes to an image in a manner that is not representative of the original. Correcting tonal range or adjusting colors post image creation to make the image look more like the original scene is far different than removing or adding objects or people. An important point though, is that this manipulation encompasses all methodology, traditional as well as digital. I greatly respect photojournalists that adhere to this moral code of ethics and make images as objectively as possible. Unfortunately, not all do, and this does create problems.

Digital technology is stimulating greater dialog between people and inspiring a second look at the processes used in the creation of images. It has been my experience that people react strongly to my digital images and inquire about not only how they're created, but also what they represent. It's fascinating to me the variation in meaning that one image can have for people based on their own personal experiences.

JPC In your work there seems to be a simultaneous dissolution of exterior surfaces and revelation of interior spaces. The images have strong components of both the organic and the inorganic. The geometric and the chaotic. Some of the imagery is challenging, as if there may be some discomfort involved in the revelation of our interiors both physically and psychologically. How do you personally relate to these themes? And are there others you'd add, perhaps even some you'd subtract or modify?

JK With a background in psychology, it's difficult for me not to want to find out as much as I can about people. The pressures of culture and society are constantly dictating what is appropriate, defining rules and deeming what is good to the point of personal and spiritual immobility. This inability for exploration and self-examination, for fear of discovering differences, causes people to turn inward and close themselves off to others. This is a reoccurring theme in my images. I suppose that's because I see it as so rampant in this culture. There are so many people trying to do what society, other people, advertisements, etc., are telling them is "right" or "best" or "the thing to make them happy" and by doing so ignore their true feelings and needs. I am constantly trying to discover the difference between what people reveal to others and what they are withholding inside. What they say in contrast to what they mean. What they feel as opposed to what they express. I want to turn them inside out and see what really drives them. We are such complex beings.

I have many concerns regarding our future, as human beings, as we become more and more secluded as a result of technology. The separation and disassociation of man from the environment is a very dangerous phenomenon. This theme has found its way into many of my images in hopes that it might motivate others to regain a personal relationship with nature.

All people face their own challenges in life, and although my images might have originated from a personal experience, it's my hope that they cross cultural boundaries and promote discussion about ideas that are difficult to talk about and perhaps painful to share. When people discover that they do not face these challenges alone, especially children, they're given a better chance of accomplishing or working through them. There are many more themes I'd like to express through my images including the differences between how people

perceive themselves and how others perceive them.

JPC Did these themes arise spontaneously or had you thought about them prior to doing the work?

>**JK** I think about the components of the images as I am taking them and based on the emotion that I have while shooting, I begin to assemble them in my head. I know what images will fit together but I don't necessarily know the exact final image or even what it might represent while I'm working. I know my initial reaction and will let it guide me. At first I was having a difficult time creating images when I couldn't see what the end result was going to look like in my head. But I realized that the mind works on many levels and sometimes you have to let go of control, to let the unconscious mind take over. Now, I accept this unplanned, emotional outlet as part of my image making process.

JPC I feel very similarly. Jerry Uelsmann related a very funny story about a group of Jungian psychologists who asked him about his creative process. They'd ask questions like, "Did you know so and so was a symbol for such and such when you created this image?" When he said no, they became excited. He said it was the first time in his life when not knowing the answer during a test was the right answer. I think there are times we have to lose control to find a greater awareness. I like the idea of controlled abandon.
So much digital work deals with accumulation. Layers of material are heaped upon one another. Do you think this accumulation is indicative of the medium, the method, or the visual process it encourages?

>**JK** I think that it is a combination of all of the above. However, for me personally, it is also a reflection of my life, where I live, my job, and the people that surround me. I love travel; I travel for work; my work overlaps my hobbies; my hobbies include photography; my creative outlet is photography; I love to shoot when I travel; etc. So many things overlap here. Television, movies, advertisements, everything is moving faster and faster while attention spans get smaller and smaller. Innovations in technology are made daily. The pace at which people move is increasing. I use multiple images to add more complexity because everything is getting more elaborate. By using multiple images, I find there is a greater potential for getting my ideas across. Although one layer of an image might not make an impression on an individual, there might be ten others that help to convey that vision. I suppose that some might think of this as a crutch, I think of it as a more extended method of storytelling that isn't available without a mixture of tools and imagery.

JPC In a great deal of this layered imagery transparency is incorporated. It may be simply a visual device to incorporate disparate information into a unified whole. If the laws of physics are disrupted an unlikely conjunction is more plausible. But there may be more at work here as well. Transparency not only produces conjunction, it can also imply a merging or even dissolution. What qualities does it evoke for you? How do you relate to the device of transparency?

>**JK** In my images, transparency reveals or hides complexity much in the same way that people do by disclosing some pieces of information while selectively holding back others. As I get older, I realize that very few times in ones life will you ever know the entire story about anything except what you experience. Even then, being a part of the experience only gives you a linear, single point of view of the experience. You still can't know everything about what happened or why. Transparency allows me to disclose some areas of images that tell a story and deliberately hide other areas to support it. It's a bit like having the ability to take a single photograph from more than one point in time, or from a different angle. Multiple experiences are combined in a single image.

JPC I certainly relate to that. Some images extend the decisive moment into a longer span of time. They can push the limits of our perceptions and challenge the way we hold experience in memory. I'm wondering if invisible information in your images is to be seen as missing or hidden information. Today we can't keep up with the flood of information; some of it can't be digested. There are also gaps in our understanding of things. And there are the limits of our understanding. As we currently push them so frequently and rapidly we are forced to become more conscious of them. All this is quite different from information that we have and either do not wish to confront or do not wish to reveal. There's a big difference between what is unknown, what is unrecognized, and what is undisclosed.

>**JK** One never gets handed a piece of paper saying "Okay, you're now an adult." When you're younger, there is this perception that once you

reach a certain age, you've learned everything. You're "done". Hence, as adults, we get very set in our ways. You've accepted something to be true for a number of years, therefore, it must be true. Then, out of the blue, someone suggests another possibility that you hadn't thought of at all. In a single sentence, this person has destroyed the very foundation of what I think I know to be true. How can I trust everything else? I know we've all experienced this and it can be a very humbling experience. The more it happens, the more I begin to see how many things I still have to learn and that not everything is as clear or as simple as it seems. One can't be completely sure of anything unless you have all the information and, it would seem, even a lifetime isn't long enough to gather it all.

I do deliberately hide information in my images. Sometimes I do it to force the viewer to use their imagination. Other times its because the absence of information if part of the message which I am trying to convey. And, finally, I would be lying if I didn't say that sometimes I do it as a type of self-defense to keep the image from revealing too much about me.

JPC "The eyes are the windows of the soul." Eyes are a very potent symbol. This symbol in particular has been enchanting digital artists. Do you have any sense why? It's not just the fact that Adobe features an eye prominently in its logo is it?

JK The eye has been a symbol for thousands of years. It's clear that the symbolism is very old - much older than Photoshop. The eye finds it's way into many of my images. In others, the lack of eyes on a face represents the inability to see clearly both internally and externally, consciously and subconsciously. In other pieces, it represents a mask over an emotion or the repression of self. The symbolic nature that others find in it varies, but the eye is a gateway into a person. To look into someone's eyes and hold eye contact promotes a bond that is analogous to pealing back a layer of a person and revealing something underneath. When people don't want to be revealed, eye contact is avoided, and disclosure is cut off. I wonder how many people have ever looked into someone else's eyes for ten seconds. It's an amazing experience.

JPC You're often your own subject matter. Your work involves self-portraiture, but it's not conventional self-portraiture. In many cases there are body parts but not a face. A face may be present but obscured. Even the interior of your body is revealed. They're interesting choices. Is this treatment meant to make the task of representation, in particular self-representation a matter of some concern for any woman, problematic or to push it beyond its traditional confines into new depths?

JK A few of the images are self-portraiture in nature but the literal figure in the image is not as important as the vision. The figure, whether it is the whole or merely a part, is representative of many figures and of the many depths of the flesh and skin as well as the soul. It is not meant to be a literal portrayal of myself or my life, but rather of the composite of concerns that span generations, gender, and cultures. A vision may emerge from a personal experience but it quickly grows and expands to incorporate the experiences of many. In many cases, I'm conveying something about me. There would be an awkwardness to having someone else in the image carry those messages and what I know about that person might get in the way of the core message. At other times, my presence is out of practicality. I can place myself in a setting and simply take the picture. Using someone else, I'd feel an obligation to explain the context of the photo. At that point, it's far too early. The image hasn't been "born" yet. It's an instinct I'm following, not an idea I'm capturing.