

Necessary Reinvention

The Birth and Maturity of a Portrait Artist

Janet Boschker,

Master Photographer, Photographic Craftsman

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Portrait photography is so much more than recording the obvious... It is a gesture, an expression, or a moment in time captured... to be remembered and revisited each time one views it. No matter the age of the subject, the times of our lives are fleeting and forgotten if not celebrated. For me, photography is the medium that I love and use to create those memories for my clients and myself.

My first experience with creating photographs was at the age of eight. My parents had decided it was time to move from East Memphis to the suburbs where newer schools and homes were more desirable. My mother sensed that I was fretful about leaving the only home I had known, and playmates I had grown up with. One day, before the move, she gave me a little plastic mint green camera loaded with black and white film and sent me out to take pictures of my friends. I marched myself up and down the street, ordering playmates to come out into their front yards to be photographed. I still have those snapshots! Who knew that 20 years later I would choose this profession of photography as a career!

Growing up with three brothers (two older, one younger) I was no stranger to competition. “The Boys” were talented athletes, and I remember playing baseball in the vacant lot at the end of our street, praying I would hit the ball so I wouldn’t be sent home because I was a girl. My parents insisted that I participate in more feminine hobbies: dance, piano and sewing, which I did, but secretly all I really wanted was a machine gun so I could play with “The Boys.” I learned patience and perfection as a result of compliance with my parents’ wishes, which would prove to serve me well later when I became interested in the arts.

Fast forward to the spring of 1968 – my eighth grade year. The art teacher from the high school next door visited our class and asked us to draw a face in profile. She then went around the classroom and pointed out those students she believed had a propensity for drawing and recommended art as an elective. I was one of the chosen. I loved my art classes, and in my Senior year of high school, I won a Scholastic Art Award for a pen and ink drawing.

We often spent Thanksgiving Holidays with my aunt and uncle in Washington, DC. My birthday is at the end of November, and the year I turned 16 it was on Thanksgiving Day. My uncle asked me what I

wanted to do – anything I wanted and if it was in his power, he would make it happen – that was his gift to me. I thought for a moment. “I want to climb the National Monument, Visit the National Gallery of Art, and see Bonnie and Clyde” (a new movie with Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty). We did it all! My brothers groaned at the thought of going to the Art Museum, but I was in heaven when I saw John Singer Sargent’s “Lady in White,” Oh, I knew then I wanted to paint someday!

I graduated in 1972, was accepted at Greensboro College and went off to become an art therapist. I was expected to go to college, but after two short months at school, being there didn’t make any sense to me. I was not ready to commit to years of higher education. When my boy – friend proposed, it sounded appealing and I accepted. I was 17.

We immediately produced a child, a beautiful little girl. I photographed her with my Kodak Instamatic in every outfit and at every phase of her development – I did not want to forget one minute of her life.

Housebound with a baby, I also took mail order art classes; she was my subject, and I received a lot of positive feedback from my long distance art teachers. Two more children followed in the next five years, and as I got busier with being a mom, the art and photography got pushed to the side. In 1982 the marriage failed and I found myself in the

precarious position of having to figure out how to provide for 3 little ones with no education and virtually no job skills. I appeared on my parents' doorstep in March of that year, grateful to have a place to go, not sure how I was going to make it work.

My sweet little eight-year-old daughter was asking questions as we drove nine hours to Grandma and Grandpa's house. Did I know anyone who had done this? Would her teachers know where she was? Would they worry? Who would give her an allowance? I had no answers, but reassured her as best as I could, my own doubts nagging at me as we made the trip.

After settling the children in, I enrolled at the community college. I chose the Advertising Design program and threw myself into learning all there was to know about layout, typography, design and drawing. It was thrilling to be back in a creative environment.

Photography was part of the required curriculum. I will never forget the excitement of seeing my image come up in the chemistry for the first time. It was an image of my son on his first day of Little League. He was mesmerized by the older boys – I still have the print – it always takes me back to the wonder of that moment. I began to spend more

and more time in the darkroom perfecting my printing skills, less and less time on other projects.

As luck would have it, a local photographer called the art department looking for someone to do the retouching on his portraits; the lead was offered to me. I walked into the studio and stopped dead in my tracks. The wonderful portraiture took my breath away. The place was in total chaos – the silver haired photographer was in the midst of testing a camera that had given trouble at a wedding the previous weekend. He stopped what he was doing and gave me a tour – I noticed a sign over the door in the workroom that said: "Neatness – a Sure Sign of a Sick Mind" and I thought: "This could work!"

I quickly picked up retouching, and within two months was working full time. I photographed my first wedding that Thanksgiving. The following year I photographed 35. I loved the energy, emotions and excitement of photographing weddings. It felt like I was sharing the best times of our clients' lives. I loved the work and the people I worked for and with. I became the studio manager within a year.

Phil Aull Studio was very prominent in Charlotte and handled all the society weddings. It grew from three staff photographers to six in my 11 years there. It was an amazing experience. We would all go out and

shoot weddings, sometimes 10 or 12 in one weekend, process the film, print, assemble and deliver the albums by the following weekend. All of it was done in house. The last year I worked there, the studio did an amazing 252 weddings!

Phil was a Professional Photographers of America Master, and encouraged us to enter our wedding images in print competition at the Professional Photographers of North Carolina convention. We did well, and I sent my images on to PPA that first year, getting two Loan Prints! I earned my Master's Degree in 1995.

My children were now teenagers. I had been working six days a week all those years; it became grueling and I was burned out. I had gone from loving my work to hating the thought of looking at another girl in a white dress. It was a very troubling time; I was feeling trapped and hopeless. I had no other job experience and no idea how to make things better. A career counselor helped me sort through my strengths and weaknesses. After many tests and discussions she gave her opinion: I was not in the wrong career, but the wrong environment. I began to think in terms of leaving the studio and starting my own business. It was terrifying. It took me a year to muster the courage to leave, but I did in 1994. To my surprise I was quickly booked solid; I never had to touch my savings.

Then the most amazing thing happened. Girls whose weddings I had done over the years began to call and ask me to photograph their children! I gave away my living room furniture, hung a background, and began to photograph children in the small 14x17 living room.

About that time I went to visit my grandmother in South Dakota. She pulled a box from beneath her bed and began showing me her collection of family portraits made in the early 1900's. Stories I had never heard were told – her little brother who died at age five – there was a wonderful portrait of him in the box. Another was a woman that my grandmother's family had taken in and raised as their own. The box also included my grandfather's baby portrait and her uncle in his raccoon coat. I was taken by the simplicity, the amazing lighting and timeless look of the photography.

When I questioned her about it, she showed me a picture of the tiny town where she grew up in North Dakota, on the Canadian border, taken from a grain elevator. There was an itinerant photographers' tent set up on the edge of town, and she explained that he would come around every so often and photograph the townspeople in the tent, using natural light that fed in through the open tent flap. It was a defining moment for me. I wanted to give my clients images of their

children and families they cherished. This became a driving force for me and a reason to excel that surpassed making money or winning merits.

I thought of the bay window in my living room I had carefully covered over to block the light out. When I returned home, I uncovered it and began experimenting with window light at the end of each session. At the time, ISO 400 was the fastest film available. I was in love with my 150 soft focus lens, so I was locked into 5.6 as my working aperture. Shutter speeds were dependent on whether the day was overcast or sunny. No longer could I be the crazy, funny photographer working for big smiles; I had to calm everything down to avoid movement in the image. And so my style shifted to a sweeter, gentler look with children – and my clients loved it. It became “my look” and through word of mouth, my portrait business grew.

Having worked in an environment that kept everything in house from film developing to print finishing, I found working with labs nearly impossible. I was accustomed to fine tuning color and density to suit my taste. So I built a darkroom in my backyard and specialized in black and white portraiture. It was tremendously satisfying to have complete

control of the entire process, from creating the image, to printing and framing the finished portrait.

I continued on this happy path for many years. I loved the black and white portraiture I was producing. Having eliminated the distraction of color, I learned how lighting impacted the image through highlight and shadow in a way that I had not been aware of before.

In the late nineties, I visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The theme was something on the order of "American Life in the Twentieth Century." The images were black and white, varied in size between 4x6 and 8x10. All were framed with large white mats and skinny wooden frames. It told the story of life in America beginning with the year 1900, through all the changes of the century: automobiles, airplanes, the world wars, the depression, the fifties, and sixties. It was all there: 100 years of American Life in black and white.

Inspired, I decided to offer my clients that look. I encouraged them to document the times of their children's lives by displaying them matted, framed and on the wall – small images printed on fiber paper – much like the museum had. This look perfectly complimented the light and airy look that I gravitate to when photographing young children. The color white symbolizes innocence and purity. For me, it represents

the inherent sweetness all children possess. These early images in a family's history are intimate portraits to be treasured as time passes. A young mother's love was evident in the image "Lullaby", (center top row of the portfolio). Her gentle connection with her newborn combined with the lyrical curves of soft fabrics all speak to the quiet melody of a lullaby she might be quietly humming to her baby.

I enjoy photographing children for so many reasons. They are delightfully spontaneous, expressive, and loving. While they each have their own individual personality, natural curiosity makes it impossible to resist exploring their surroundings. Given the choice of clinging to mom or holding a colorful, shiny marble and discovering the way light dances as it is turned while holding this marvelous new thing... curiosity wins every time. They are sensitive to genuine interest in them, and so it is that we develop a relationship that continues to grow each time they come to visit. I have a wonderful extended family relationship with many of my little clients, and nothing is quite as rewarding as the hugs we exchange at the end of a session.

In my early days of learning the craft of photography, I was taking oil painting classes with a long term goal that I would someday become a portrait painter. My first attempts were decent, but I struggled with

getting a perfect likeness of my subjects. I put the dream aside and concentrated on learning the art of portrait photography. With the advent of Painter software, all that doubt went away. I took a class with Jeremy Sutton in 2008 and immediately began to offer painted portraits. This is the direction I feel pulled more and more as my career continues to grow and change.

One of my first painted portraits was the little boy in the center of my portfolio. The way the light kisses the little curls at the back of his neck and the tip of his little nose touches my heart... or is it because he is, in fact, my grandchild? For me that image is the epitome of childhood innocence. His inquiring expression, the delicate gesture of his hands, the slight lean as he begins to escape and explore the garden on his own...all speak to that moment of his life and my emotional tie to my first grandchild. This is the feeling that I hope to evoke when my clients view their children and grandchildren's portraits that I have created.

It's amazing how our profession continues to change. With change come challenges, but it feels good to know that we have the unique opportunity to reinvent ourselves.

Even though I now use digital technology to create my portraiture, I continue to strive for the simple classic look that I believe will be valued

over time. I imagine that someday, somewhere, someone's grandmother will bring out her cherished collection of family portraits and tell the story of her life to a young person – passing on family history that only photographs can bring to life.

Respectfully Submitted,

Janet Boschker

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Phil and Haroldine Aull: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work with you, and for teaching me the business and craft of photography. Thanks, Phil, for the advice that I have remembered often when things were rough: “Just look yourself in the mirror and tell yourself – I can do this!”

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Joyce Wilson: Thanks for sharing your “One for Thee, One for Me” philosophy and the very wise advice to find my own artistic voice.

Jay Stock: Thank you for laying a foundation that has helped me come to believe I am an artist – to continue on the journey – to realize the importance of simply doing.

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Leslie, Bob and Jennifer: My three wonderful children who gave me motivation to excel and supported me even when they doubted I knew what I was doing. You 3 are my heart. I love you dearly.

Biography

Janet Boschker began her career in professional photography in 1983 as wedding photographer at a leading studio in Charlotte, NC. A single mom of 3, she juggled career and family for 11 years before starting her own NorthLight Photography in 1994, specializing in young children and their families.

Her involvement on state and national levels led to the PPA Master of Photography in 1995 and the Craftsman in 2000. 2006 brought the PPA International Affiliate Judge status and led to judging engagements on the state, regional, national and international levels. She earned the PPA Imaging Excellence Award in 2013.

Janet has been actively involved in Professional Photographers of North Carolina her entire career. She is a Past President of PPNC and served on their board for many years, presently as a PPA Councilor. She was director of East Coast School Photographic Workshops, a PPA Affiliate School, from 2008 – 2010, having served on that board for 10 years prior.

It continues to be her pleasure to be invited to judge, speak and share her experience in the hope that it will be helpful to another's journey in the incredible field of professional photography.

Recent Accomplishments

2005: 1st Place Children, SEPPA, Kodak Gallery Award

2007: 1st and 2nd Place Children, 1st Place Women, 2nd Place Groups, NC Photographer of the Year, Kodak Gallery Award, Fuji Award

2008: SEPPA Distinguished Award, NC 2nd Place Children

2010: Canon Par Excellence Award, Kodak Gallery Award x2

2011: 1st Place Bridal portrait, 1st and 2nd Place Commercial Photojournalism

PPA Photographer of the Year: 2006 – Silver, 2007 – Platinum,
2008 – Silver, 2009 – Gold, 2010 – Gold, 2011: Bronze

2013: PPA Imaging Excellence

PPA National Award – 2009

SEPPA Award – 2011