

# A Universe of Possibilities

By Ella Putney Carlson

"We are part of this universe; we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts, is that the universe is in us." --- Neil Degrasse Tyson

Most photographers take photographs to freeze time: to capture a portrait of a child as they grow, to fix in time a gorgeous landscape in the perfect light, or to create physical memories of a special occasion. For me, photography has become a door that opens into a universe of possibilities.

I am the youngest, by far, of five children. My siblings grew up a generation apart from me. My status as the family "accident" was underscored by my mother's commitment to a state mental facility for a nervous breakdown<sup>1</sup> three weeks after my birth.

I had tried to enter this world with my arm over my head; and in his attempt to keep my arm from breaking the doctor tried to push me back into the womb; causing my mother a great deal of additional pain.

During what would be a year and a half stay in the hospital the repeated electroshock treatments she underwent would cost my mother nearly a decade of memories. But as the currents of electricity consumed her memories; one memory, the memory of my traumatic birth was one she would hold on to - one of the few that would remain.

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<sup>1</sup> In current terms, her condition would undoubtedly be diagnosed as postpartum psychosis.

So there I was, an infant, already trying to do things differently, cast as an outsider and the perceived cause of massive and extended family upheaval. Even though I was too young to immediately comprehend the ramifications of my untimely birth, I've always had a strong sense of being unique. Set apart from all of my siblings and their children; I grew up on the edge of all of their life experiences.

As a result of my singular status, I spent a great deal of my childhood as an only child. Being alone much of the time, I often watched old movies, especially science fiction. Watching stories inspired me to create them and I wrote roughly crafted stories. I spent more than a year writing a novel at the age of 12 or 13, only to tear it into pieces because I wasn't satisfied with it, but only after completing hundreds of handwritten pages. It would not be my last adventure in creating characters.

Photography played a large role in my life then as well. Beginning as a child of about seven, I spent nearly every cent of my allowance on film and on printing images from my Kodak Brownie box camera. By the age of eight, I was already playing with scale and trying to create images that resonated with a sense of the unreal. I was trying, albeit without much success, to create magic...something outside of my reality.

As a young adult, I continued on with photography, escaping the tedium of an office job by spending weekends in a makeshift darkroom: developer and fixer on the washing machine; bath and toner in the bathtub, and a safelight casting a surreal red glow over everything. In my early thirties, I worked for a newspaper photographing everything from public appearances by politicians... to an airplane crash... to babies at local summer fairs. In my mid-thirties, I opened up my first photography studio where I did portraits, weddings and events, and some commercial work. I also taught beginning photography and darkroom techniques.

While meandering through the different specialities of photography and "learning the craft," I worked to support us while my husband attended veterinary

college, gave birth to two sons, helped to renovate a massive old farmhouse, helped build a new house, and started four new businesses with my husband. Through it all, photography was always a constant.

## Course Corrections

In my forties, I stepped away from professional photography. In spite of the classes I took, the workshops I attended, I felt like I had reached the limits of what I could do in photography. The sense of magical revelation I'd long felt in the darkroom had given way to a dissatisfaction at not having all the artistic control and individualism I craved. I had tried painting emulsion onto watercolor paper with some nice but limited results. I hand-colored photographs, but it wasn't enough. I decided to go back to college to study graphic design.

The holy trinity of graphic design is Photoshop®, Illustrator® and a page layout program which, at the time was Quark<sup>2</sup>. It is important that a designer knows these three programs well. At that point, in the mid-nineties, Photoshop was in its toddler stage, as was digital photography. Even using that early version of Photoshop, it didn't take long for me to realize that Photoshop was the answer to so much that frustrated me about film photography. Finally, I could accomplish dramatic photo editing and so much more! I could *potentially* create almost anything I could imagine. A whole new world of imaging possibilities opened up to me. While getting my certificate in graphic design, I spent considerable time pouring through Photoshop books in order to get closer to that unrealized potential in my own work.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Now Adobe InDesign is used far more frequently.

<sup>3</sup> In the mid 1990's, baud rates for internet connections made learning via modalities like youtube.com impossible, and video production was expensive and difficult. The only way to learn was to read or go to classes and seminars.

A few months after graduating in 1999, I earned my "Certified Adobe Expert" credentials for Photoshop and that opened the door for me to get a teaching job at the university where I'd studied graphic design. I worked part-time teaching, and full-time as a graphic designer for several years. Even though at that point, I defined myself as a graphic designer, I continued to do personal photographic work. In addition, I would often bring my camera to work and shoot images for the publications we were designing. In my work as an instructor, photographic principles went hand in hand with teaching Photoshop since many of my students were either professional or serious hobbyist photographers, so photography was still a very important element of my life.

As I experimented in Photoshop, I was especially drawn to the fantasy and surrealistic imagery. Escher is a particular favorite with his mind-bending, non-sensical illustrations. Other artists whose work I found inspirational were Jerry Uelsmann, Adam Martinakis, and Thom Rouse. I spent evenings and weekends obsessively going through any available Photoshop books and tutorials to figure out how to turn someone into a metal sculpture or add realistic tattoos. I learned how to use displacement maps to mold images to faces and how to make my subjects look like they were flying. When I couldn't find tutorials about how create the desired effects, I spent hours trying to dissect the methods myself. Working in Photoshop had become an addiction.

## Transition

In 2004 with both of our kids out of school, we moved about twenty miles north to a small town on the border of Massachusetts, just south of Nashua, New Hampshire. It was at this point that one of my former students invited me to visit a

New Hampshire Professional Photographers Association meeting. It was a truly welcoming group of people. Becoming an active part of PPA and participating in the continuing education as well as the competitions became a major factor in the evolution of my work. Graphic design work fell by the wayside as photography once again took center stage in my life.

With NHPPA, I became involved in the larger photographic community including image competition. Aside from receiving scores that were disappointing--- and I've had plenty of those, it was an enjoyable and very effective way to hone my photographic and observational skills. I soon joined the Professional Photographer Association of Massachusetts as well, and I am equally attached to both state organizations... once more it seems, finding myself a border dweller.

I have been a perennial student my entire life, always hungry for new information. In addition to my two college experiences, I have taken many photographic workshops, including week-long workshops with Joyce Tenneson, Mary Ellen Mark, Chris Callas, Charles Traub, and several others at the Maine Photographic Workshops. I was deeply moved by both Tenneson's and Mark's work. I continued learning through the many classes and workshops offered by PPA and its affiliates. Somehow I never felt like I'd found exactly the right path for myself. I just didn't seem to fit any of the molds. I had a respectable arsenal of digital skills, but no real direction in which to take them. I was a vehicle with no steering wheel.

## Bringing Things into Focus

In late 2013, I was informed that, due to more stringent federal accreditation requirements, I was going to lose my teaching position at the university because I

didn't have a master's degree. There were only two choices: I would have to stop teaching at the college level or go back to school again. I wrestled a bit with the decision to go back to college at that point in my life. I had harbored a quiet desire to get my master's degree since graduating from the graphic design program, but I could not justify the expense. Finally, I had my justification.

When I interviewed with the dean of the MFA program, she took a long look at my portfolio and decided that the visual arts program would be a better fit for me than the photography program because my work straddled the border between photography and digital painting with the amount of image manipulation in my work. I was outside of the mainstream of either MFA program, but fortunately, the MFA program was small enough that there was a great deal of "cross-pollination" between the programs. I was able to see what the photography students were doing and talk with them at length. I was also able to get critiques from the extraordinary photography faculty while fully participating in the visual arts program.

The MFA program was very challenging and, at times, utterly exhausting. I spent many hours studying the work of visual artists as well as photographers. The program included hour upon hour of critiques by a wide variety of artists and their feedback was based more on the meaning of the work and how it was being transmitted rather than the technical aspects. Gradually, I came to understand that my intentions in making the art were very important and my inability to conform to any previously perceived work models was not.

For my MFA thesis project, I created dozens of mirrored images of tea on the theme of "Reconsiderations."<sup>4</sup> These images were made from tea in teapots, tea in cups, iced tea and flowering tea. The imagery was highly manipulated. Toward the end of the project, I started to see faces appearing in many of the images. This

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<sup>4</sup> "Reconsiderations" was an effort to explore the idea of looking further into a subject before making any decision about its value and validity.

interested me a great deal, so I began pulling those vague details out and enhancing those that looked like facial or bodily features. It was all the more interesting when the results didn't look quite like human features. I was totally captivated by the possibilities. The tea project evolved into the alien project and I began photographing materials other than tea and looking for any hints of facial features as I worked to develop the images.

Over the past couple of years, my aliens have grown into more and more complex creatures. I started to collect sample images of eyes and facial features to use as reference images, and I worked out my own ways to create eyes from the same materials used to make the creatures. With more fully developed features, my creatures started to really come to life for me. I used Photoshop's vast capabilities to add dimension and expressiveness to the facial features and body parts. As Photoshop's brush technology improved, I learned how to create hair and fur, and I started making new brushes from my own photographs of smoke and water.

The first alien for which I really started to combine more extensive digital painting with the manipulated photography was an owl-like creature called "Whoo's Got the Key." It took a lot of experimentation and digital hand-painting to transform a photograph of the top of a tea pot into an alien bird, but I really enjoyed the process and "Whoo's Got the Key" became part of my third diamond photographer of the year case and a part of a solo exhibition of alien art pieces at a New Hampshire gallery in November and December of 2017. I also began experimenting with printing my images on different media. Many of the prints for the alien gallery exhibit were printed on metal or acrylic because I felt it created a more visceral sense of dimension.

These alien creatures make me smile or even laugh out loud at times. To me, they all have distinct personalities and I can't help but imagine backstories for them. I try to find new technical challenges to keep things interesting as well. For

example, in the case of "Crown Royal on the Rocks," I decided to try to make a creature that looked as though it were constructed completely out of water, including the arms, fingers and clothing. I've made one-eyed creatures, and I've made creatures with many eyes. I've made aliens that look robotic, and others that are reminiscent of household pets. I've made my creatures out of everything from the soap suds on my windshield at the car wash to the Dupont Circle subway escalator in Washington, DC.

In these creatures, I see echoes of the old science fiction movies I watched as a child, and the extensions of the tricks of scale I tried with my Kodak Brownie. There is, most certainly, also evidence of the hours I spent creating characters with my early writing. Composing them uses the whole range of skills that I've learned over my lifetime including every nuance of what I've learned in all the many lighting and photography classes I've attended.

Part of what draws me to creating the aliens is the continuing challenge: the challenge of finding new ways to exploit the potential of digital tools; the challenge of making more lifelike creatures and of engaging not just my imagination, but the viewer's as well. There seems to be no limit, apart from my own skill set, to making new and more complex creatures.

The insurmountability of the art of photography is another aspect that keeps me involved and engaged. I can never know everything about this art form, photography, in which we all participate, especially as digital tools develop further and become ever more sophisticated. There is always another hurdle to conquer. And because I let each creature evolve as I work, my results are never predictable. Each one is a short story whose ending is unknown until I put in the work.

Above all, I believe the main thing that attracts me to this work is that I identify with them: their eccentricity, their quirkiness, and their humor. My aliens, like me, are border dwellers. They all start with photographs but end up as something utterly transformed. Their genesis is in ordinary objects and yet they gradually develop into



something quite exotic. They are sometimes weird, but engaging, and very often they feel familiar, yet distinctly foreign at the same time.

I have found a way to work and flourish in the field of photography that fits completely with my sense of always being on the border of things... of so often finding myself dancing a bit outside of the dance floor. It seems that everything in my artistic life has brought me to this point, and I'm finding it a delightful universe of possibilities in which to live.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E.P. Carlson', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ella Putney Carlson

M.Photog.,M.Artist,Cr.,CPP,EA-ASP

# Resume

## **Ella Putney Carlson**

MFA, M.Photos, M.Artist, Cr, CPP, EA-ASP

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### **Exhibitions**

Aliens Invade Jupiter Hall, Manchester, NH, solo exhibition, Nov-Dec, 2017

Manchester Council of the Arts, solo exhibit at City Hall, Feb - March - May, 2017

The WREN Gallery, Two Artist Exhibit, "Orbits," May of 2017

The WREN Gallery, Bethlehem, NH "2017 Artist Preview Exhibit", January, 2017

Danforth Museum, Annual Juried Exhibit, June-August, 2016, (Honorable Mention)

ArtisTree Gallery and Art Center, Pomfret, Vermont, "Unbound VI", (Honorable mention)

Vermont Center for Photography, Annual Exhibit, June, 2016

ALL Gallery, Lowell, MA, Spring Exhibit 2106 (First Prize)

New Hampshire Institute of Art, Williams Gallery, January, 2016, "Reconsiderations"

Professional Photographers of America, International Exhibitions, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2011, 2010, and 2008

American Society of Photographers, Loan collection exhibitions, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2011

DeCordova Museum, Group show, 2001

### **Publications**

Monograph: *Fine Art Photoshop*, book published by Amherst Media, May 2017

Professional Photographer Magazine, February, 2018 edition, "Diamond Photographers Spotlight edition," also 2017 & 2016

Loan Collection, Professional Photographers of America, Marathon Publishing, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2011, 2010, and 2008

Showcase Book, PPA, Marathon Publishing, 2008

Professional Photographer Magazine, 2010, Photographer Spotlight

Professional Photographer Magazine, November, 2009 edition

## **Photography Awards**

Master Photographer, Master Artist, Photographic Craftsman, Certified Professional Photographer, Educational Associate - American Society of Photographers  
First place, 2018 Northeast District in both PO and Artist cases  
First and third places, 2018 Northeast District, Artist category  
First Place, 2018 Northeast District, Illustrative/Commercial category  
Finalist in the 2018 Photoshop World Guru Awards  
PPA Diamond Photographer of the Year: 2017, 2016, 2015  
PPA Photographer of the Year: 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2011, 2010, 2008, and 2007  
Grand Imaging Awards: Finalist in the Illustrative category, 2011  
Professional Photographers of America Imaging Excellence Awards, 2017 and 2015  
PPA of Mass Photographic Excellence Award (top award) 2017, 2016, 2014, 2013, 2011  
NHPPA Photographer of the Year 2009  
Multiple Kodak Gallery Awards and Fuji Masterpiece Awards, and Courts of Honor Awards and Judges Awards in the PPA of New England regional, New Hampshire and Massachusetts print competitions

## **Education**

New Hampshire Institute of Art, Masters Degree in Visual Arts  
University of Massachusetts, Lowell, Certificate in Graphic Design  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, B.A. in Fine Arts and Humanities  
Maine Photographic Workshops, various workshops taken from 1985-1999  
New England Institute of Professional Photography, 2007-2018

## **Experience**

University of Massachusetts, Lowell, 1999-present  
Instructor - Photographic Imaging, Advanced Photographic Imaging  
Professional Photographers Association of New England, Vice President & image chairman  
2017 to present; Newsletter Editor, 2015-2016  
New Hampshire Institute of Art, Board of Trustees - 2016 to 2018  
New England Camera Club Council Annual Conference, Featured speaker 2018  
Ellaprints Photographic Art, 1986 - present  
Photographer, instructor, consultant and digital artist  
PPA, PPANE, NHPPA, Maine PPA, and PPAM 2005 - present  
Speaker / workshop instructor - Photoshop® and Painter®

## **Experience, continued...**

Bahamas International School of Photography, PPA Affiliate School, Instructor, 2012  
New Hampshire Professional Photographers Association, Membership Chair, 2007 - 2009,  
Print committee, 2006 - present  
New Hampshire Institute of Art, Instructor - Digital Imaging, Photoshop, 2005-2006,  
Graphic Designer, American Science and Engineering, Inc., 1997-1999  
Self-employed, 1999 - 2006  
Middlesex College, Instructor - Photoshop and Web Design, 2001-2002  
DeCordova Museum, Instructor - Digital imaging, Photoshop, 2000  
News Photographer, Beacon Communications, 1980-1982

## **Bio**

Ella Putney Carlson has a master of fine arts degree from the New Hampshire Institute of Art and has earned professional photography degrees including Master Photographer, Master Artist, Craftsman, Certified Professional Photographer and ASP Educational Associate. Her fine art composites and photography have won multiple Kodak Gallery Awards and Fuji Masterpiece Awards as well as the Diamond Photographer of the Year award in international competition each of the past three years. In 2018, she placed first in both the Photographic Open and Artist categories of the Northeast District competitions and had the first place entry nationally in the artist category of IPC district competitions. She has been teaching photographic imaging at the University of Mass, Lowell since the late 1990's.

Ella serves on the board of the Professional Photographers Association of New England as vice president and image chairperson. Her art has been exhibited widely including the Danforth Museum, Vermont Center for Photography, and DeCordova Museum. Her work has been published in several books as well as the Professional Photographers of America Loan Book, the Showcase Book, and Professional Photographer Magazine, and her book "Fine Art Photoshop" was published in May of 2017.