

Detours Along the Way

Cheri Hammon, M.Photog., M.Artist, MEI, Cr., CPP

I've been an artist all of my life, in one way or another. The art and mediums I practiced changed and progressed as I got older. There was one thing that didn't change; I loved creating art.

My career in art began at a very early age in the late 60s in Augusta, Georgia. My work was on the walls of a very exclusive gallery, the walls under my bed, literally on the walls. These masterpieces consisted of drawings with pencils, pens, and crayons. I spent hours under the bed and created things from my imagination. This gallery was discovered when my parents decided to paint my room. They supported my desire to be creative and got me the supplies I needed to keep me from further modifying the walls of my room. My parents were always big supporters of whatever I wanted to do. My Mom is still my biggest fan.

I grew up drawing and painting, and I loved art classes. They were always my favorite classes, and I excelled in them. In second grade, one of my teachers even entered one of my pieces in a contest which won a second place prize for my age group. It was a mosaic made from different colored cut up pieces of construction paper. One could argue that was my first 'print' competition.

In grade school I received a small camera as a gift for Christmas. It was yet another outlet for creativity. I loved taking pictures. I liked flowers and abstract things the best. I have a memory of taking a picture of a raindrop in a chain link fence that reflected everything around. I remember finding it fascinating. I graduated to bigger and better cameras all through school. I was in love with taking pictures.

Even though I spent years in art classes and taking pictures for fun, I never even considered making a living as any kind of an artist. It never occurred to me to follow that path. After high school graduation in 1984, I attended Augusta Tech in the cosmetology program. It was a year long program, and I graduated with a job in a salon. I loved it! I spent a year as a hair stylist. I began to develop health problems and went to the doctor. After extensive and painful tests, I found out that I had severe allergies to all the chemicals I was working with and around in the salon. I was told I could not continue to be in that environment as my health problems would only get worse over time. I was devastated. This is what I had wanted to do for so long and now I had to take a detour and find something else.

I started looking for a job, but nothing jumped out at me as something I wanted to do as a career. I overheard my sister talking to one of her friends whose mother worked at a photography studio that the studio was looking for a sales person. That studio was Fitz-Symms in Augusta, Georgia. It was founded by Morgan Fitz and was later joined by Robert Symms. Fitz-Symms was the biggest and best studio in town, and it involved a hobby that I loved growing up. That's all I needed to hear. I went to the interview and got the job. Little did I know that working there would set me on the path to where I am today. I very quickly found out that sales were not my thing. I couldn't sell fire to Eskimos. During this time, the retouch artist for the studio was about to retire. Mr. Symms, instead of firing me, asked me if I wanted to learn to retouch. He knew of my art background and thought I would be good at it. My first lessons were from the lady who was about to retire, Elsa. She was not much of a people person or a teacher, but was very good at what she did. I had a few lessons with her, and she was done with me.

I began taking classes on negative and print retouching at the Georgia School of Professional Photography (GA School), an affiliate school for the Professional Photographers of America (PPA). My first classes on negative and print retouching were taught by Jane Conner-Ziser. I knew that photographs were retouched but never gave it much thought on how it was done. I was amazed at what could be done with brushes and dyes. I remember thinking it was magical looking at the tip of the brush, which tapered down to one tiny hair, through the magnifier of the retouching machine and watching the dye flow out to change colors and density on the negative. On the prints, I learned to use brushes, homemade Q-tips and cotton balls with liquid dyes and dry dyes to retouch and enhance the prints. Applying the dry dyes with cotton, and then buffing the surface reminded me of art class in school, and I had a blast doing it. Beyond using the dyes, I also sprayed the prints to give them a rough finish and applied colored pencil artwork. I took every class Jane ever offered over the years including digital retouching when Photoshop came on the scene some years later. The magic continued with digital retouching. Instead of using a brush and dye on the negative and then again dye blending on the print, it was a click of a button to retouch a spot or blemish with one action. I was stunned how quickly something could be retouched. Jane continues to be a mentor to this day, and I like to say that she taught me everything I learned about retouching.

When I attended our state and PPA conventions, I saw convention attendees with different colored ribbons round their neck and wanted to know what this was. I found out that the ribbons were the result of lots of hard work, print competition, volunteering, or teaching. They represented the different degrees that PPA offered. I remember thinking, "Wow, that's really impressive. I wonder if I'll be able to accomplish major goals like these one day." Over the years, other new photographers would tell me that they felt intimidated when they went to conventions and saw more seasoned photographers wearing all those ribbons. They felt that

those ribbon wearing photographers were elitists, some sort of exclusive club. Thank goodness I had a completely different feeling about the experience. I wasn't intimidated at all; I was inspired by these people and wanted to set these goals and go after them myself.

After I became the in-house retouch artist for Fitz-Symms, I did all the negative and print retouching and the airbrush work for the large copy-restoration business the studio had. Mr. Symms had a deep love of old photographs and was very knowledgeable about the history of photography. He would tell me about all of the old processes, Daguerreotypes, tin types, glass plates, and carte de visites; he knew them all. I loved the care he took with each one as if he were holding history itself in his hands, and he instilled in me to do the same.

I became very proficient at the retouching and artwork, so much so that Mr. Symms suggested to me that I begin competing in print competition. I knew about the print competitions for photographers, but I had no idea there was such a thing for the retouch artists. Fitz-Symms had a huge high school senior business, so I had plenty of possibilities for print competition on hand. I entered my first Art/Tech (retouching) competition in 1994. I received one merit out of four. The next year, I merited all four with one loan. I was hooked on a new art form and starting working toward the white ribbon for the Master Artist Degree. I was finally on my way to getting one of those coveted ribbons. I began getting video critiques on VHS with my entries from the jurors, learned from them, put their advice to use, and got better. This is when I first heard of Helen Yancy. Helen was and is one of the most respected artists and photographers in the industry. She did beautiful portrait paintings traditionally and later digitally, and she was an inspiration to me and still is. She was the one who critiqued my work on VHS tape. After taking her advice, I would check my negative retouching work on a Photovix that Fitz-Symms acquired. It's was device that one could project a negative as a positive on a white screen. It was purchased for wedding work to make video slide shows, but I think I used it more than the photographers did.

Back then, one had to become certified before receiving a Master Degree. I went through the process and got certified in 1996. In 1997 I finally had earned enough merits and requirements to be awarded my first degree, Master Artist, the white ribbon, in Las Vegas at the PPA convention. Mr. Robert Symms walked across the stage with me and hung my ribbon around my neck, and Helen Yancy, who was PPA President at the time, presented the degree to me. It was very special because Mr. Symms had supported and encouraged, me and Helen was an idol of mine and was *the* Master Artist. I found out firsthand how print competition will make an artist better, and I continue to enter to this day.

After receiving the Master Artist Degree, I began getting requests to speak and teach on negative and print retouching. I did a few programs for state affiliates and even one at a PPA convention in an Art Tech in the Round. I was amazed that anyone would think I could teach them something. I was also asked to start judging state level Art/Tech competitions.

After being at Fitz-Symms for thirteen years, it was time for me to make another detour. I was ready to jump into digital, and the studio was not. I loved my time there and know without a doubt that the people with whom I worked is what shaped my career and work ethic and helped make me the person and artist I am today. I moved to Atlanta, Georgia and began working at Showcase Photo and Video. I was the manager of the custom digital lab doing retouching, copy/restoration, and wide format printing for photographers and artists. This was my first experience with digital printing and it was with the notorious Iris Printer. The Iris was a complicated printer with a reputation of being finicky, but it made beautiful giclee prints when it worked. The term 'giclee' was a term coined by Iris that roughly translated means 'ink jet print' from a French word. Popular with artists who would have giclee prints made of original artwork, this printer was purchased used by Showcase for that very reason, but it never worked well for any length of time. It needed extensive daily maintenance, and it broke down frequently. It was a huge source of frustration for me. Despite this, I loved the printing process and being able to make a beautifully crafted print from a digital file. Seeing a print come off of the printer gave me a huge feeling of completion and satisfaction. I still feel that way today after seeing a painted portrait canvas or a fine art print come off of my printer for my clients.

In 1999 I took another class from Jane Conner-Ziser at The GA School. This time, instead of negative and print retouching or Photoshop, it was a wonderful new program called Corel Painter. I was so in love with this program, and it was right up my alley. I got to *paint* with all of these mediums offered by the program, things that would not be possible with traditional media. I felt like a kid again in art class, but instead of paints and brushes, my tools were a Wacom tablet and stylus. I remembered being in awe the first time I saw my brush strokes with the tablet and stylus, become *paint* moving across my monitor. My original photograph morphed into a beautiful painting right before my eyes. I worked with it every day and practiced it all the time. I felt this was going to be something huge for me down the road.

I had been a member of Georgia Professional Photographers Association (GPPA) for fifteen years and attended the conventions, watched and worked the print competitions, but never entered as a photographer. All of my entries to this point had been for retouching. At that time, GPPA didn't have an artist category in their print competitions. I began to seriously take photographs and learned a lot during this time about line and design, exposure, lighting, and composition. I had fallen in love with florals, landscapes, and abstracts. I loved florals because I found the lines and flow in them so elegant, almost like the movement of dancers. When using

a macro lens with the florals, I could capture strange and intimate landscapes that most never see. Once in a conversation with my best friend Amy, she mentioned she could see the influence of Georgia O'Keefe in my floral images. I really had no idea that the inspiration her sensual floral paintings gave me, had affected me that much that it was visible in my own images. I had always loved and admired O'Keefe's work, and to be told that, surprised and delighted me. Landscapes, for me, were sharing my part of the world, or whatever part of the world I was in, that I thought was so beautiful and majestic. Watching how the light changing from second to second could completely change the look and feel of a scene was fascinating, almost like the scene was alive and breathing. I loved the beautiful soft pastel colors at sunrise on the beach and being able to capture that peaceful and tranquil part of the day before the hustle and bustle of a hot summer day with tourists. Living in Georgia close to mountains and the coast, I had plenty of scenery from which to choose. Finding shapes and tones as well as lines and designs in nature and manmade things is what made abstracts so much fun and always an exercise in imagination for me. I always wonder how the viewer would see and interpret them. In every photograph I took and every painting I did, I've always tried to create more than just a pretty picture. I'm hoping that it sparks a feeling or emotion for the viewer.

In 2001 I entered my first photographic print competition at GPPA. I won several print awards, a Kodak Gallery Award, and the First Timer award. I was ecstatic to have done so well my first time out with photographs instead of the familiarity of retouching. This was also just about a week after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. It was an emotional roller coaster ride because of the shock and sadness of 9/11 and the joy of doing so well with print competition. My awards seemed overshadowed by tragic events, and I felt guilty feeling happy about my accomplishments. I realized during this time how important our industry is to the world and the impact we can have. We document history, good or bad, and we record memories of families, loved ones, and events for future generations. This really hit home for me after my father's passing in 2015. I am grateful that we have many wonderful photographs of him to enjoy. We create beautiful art to uplift and inspire and to challenge thought. What we do is so important.

I received the Craftsman Degree, the blue ribbon, in 2001 after earning enough merits for speaking and teaching. Speaking was something that did not come easily to me, and I thought striving for the Craftsman degree would help get me over my fear. I had gut wrenching fear which caused me to become physically sick before every program, but I pushed on because of my desire to reach my goal. After receiving the Craftsman degree, I found out that in the pursuit for that degree made the fear subside a little but not much.

After several years and the stress of working with equipment that was down most of the time, I left Showcase Photo and Video and went to work in a photographic print lab north of Atlanta, HS Photo. Thrilled to be a retouch artist and not in charge of any departments or problem equipment, I thought it would be a great fit for me. The environment there and the drive through Atlanta every day became too stressful, and I left there after a few years.

I had always had a place to land work wise, but this time I did not. I found out the owners of a local studio might be looking for a retouch artist. They were Eric and Dawn Richards, GPPA members and friends, at Richards Studio. We talked, and I started working in their studio a few days a week. This was a welcomed detour.

Photographers began telling me they would love to be able to offer painted portraits to their clients, but they didn't have the time or inclination to do it themselves. I listened, and Art By Cheri was born. I felt for a while that there could be a need for my painting and wide format printing skills which I began to put to use. I purchased a 44 inch Epson printer, and I started painting portraits in Corel Painter, printing and embellishing them for other photographers and have been going strong ever since. All of my life, it never occurred to me that I would be able to make a living as an artist, and I was doing exactly that. I love being able to offer a valuable service to other professional photographers. I finally found out what I'm supposed to be doing. Although the original images were not mine, I derived great pleasure and artistic satisfaction to be able to deliver to them masterpieces from their images. It was the perfect situation for me. I worked on my own business and was a retouch artist in Richards Studio part time. I loved Eric and Dawn, and being in a studio environment again was fun.

In 2007 just when things are going great, my husband's company moved us to Minnesota, and my perfect situation changed. I continued to do the studio's retouching via the internet, and I also continued to work on my own business. As long as I had internet and UPS, I could be anywhere, but it was a long way from home, and it was hard for me. After seven months, that company folded. We ended up moving back to Georgia. Dizzy with all the detours, I went back to the same arrangement with Richards Studio part time and Art By Cheri at home.

A few years later, I divorced.

After entering paintings and other digital creations into the Electronic Imaging category of PPA print competition, I earned my third degree, Master of Electronic Imaging, the red ribbon, in 2009. Marissa Pitts was the merit coordinator at PPA at the time, and I remember she joked with me that because of me and my combination of degrees, she had to buy a large amount of red, white, and blue ribbon that she never used for anyone else as the white ribbon was retired shortly after. I was proud of my exclusive patriotic ribbon and I still have it.

While attending the judging class at IPC judging, I met a handsome, charming juror named Dennis Hammon through a mutual friend over breakfast, bacon to be exact. Eventually, we fell in love, and I moved to Idaho. Art By Cheri is as strong as ever, and I still do retouching for Richards Studio via internet. Dennis and I were married in view of the Tetons, and my adventurous detour out West has been wonderful with an awesome partner in life and work. We are a great team doing portraits and playing off of each other's talents in photography and art. We love traveling and photographing the beautiful world around us. We live close to Tetons National Park and Yellowstone National Park and make trips there frequently to recharge and to photograph two of the most magnificent places on earth. In the sight of the mountains among the rivers, streams and wildlife, the kiss of the early morning pink light on the Tetons and the mystery of the hot springs and geysers is a feast for the eyes and the soul, sparking inspiration on every level.

In 2012 I received my fourth degree, Master Photographer, the yellow ribbon. It's surreal to me that I was once new in the industry and saw all those who had the beautiful colored ribbons, set goals to earn those ribbons myself, and actually achieved them. Now, I proudly wear those beautiful colored ribbons. As one of only eight PPA members who hold all four PPA degrees, it's humbling to see where all the detours have taken me. I can only hope I can be just as inspiring to those new in the industry - as much as those who came before me were for me. I was bitten by that bug so many years before, and this industry still excites and inspires me. I look forward to seeing what new technological advances are made in the coming years and what kind of tools we will have at our fingertips. I am also enjoying going old school back, to traditional media with paints on my personal images and trying new techniques. I relish being able to utilize traditional and digital methods to create art. It's an amazing time for artists as we can have almost any tool available to us. Looking back on my journey, I am thankful for each and every detour because they have made me the person and artist I am today. I am also thankful for the late Robert Symms. Because of him and his encouragement to enter print competitions and be more than just a retouch artist, I have gone on so much more of a meaningful journey, and what a crazy one it has been.

Respectfully submitted,



Cheri Hammon
M. Photog., M. Artist, MEI, Cr., CPP

Cheri Hammon Biography

Cheri Hammon
M. Photog., M. Artist, MEI, Cr., CPP

Cheri began her career 30 years ago as a photographic retouch artist at Fitz-Symms Photographers in Augusta Ga. She did negative and print retouching, hand tinting as well as artwork for copy and restoration of old photographs. She's done retouching and artwork for many of the finest portrait photographers in the country. Since 1999 Cheri has offered commissioned paintings in Corel Painter and fine art printing to Professional Photographers worldwide.

Cheri is a member of Professional Photographers of America (PPA). She is a CPP and been awarded all four degrees, Master Photographer, Master Artist, Craftsman and MEI. She was awarded the Georgia Fellowship Degree from the Georgia Professional Photographers Association (GPPA) and was named Georgia Professional Photographers Association's "2006 Photographer of the Year". She is currently a member of the Professional Photographers of Idaho where she was named 2013 and 2014 Master Photographer of the Year and was awarded the Idaho Fellowship Degree in 2016.

Cheri's fine art paintings only begin as a digital photograph, then they are painted by hand, stroke by stroke using Corel Painter, tablet and stylus and then printed as pigmented ink on fine art paper or canvas giclee. Her photographs and paintings have won numerous awards and have been published in the PPA Showcase and Loan Collection books and recently in the Painter Showcase book. Cheri also was awarded the "Canon Par Excellence Award" at the Western States District Print Competition in 2013.

Cheri moved from Georgia to Idaho in 2011 and is looking forward to a new adventure. Find Cheri on Facebook as Cheri Fitzgerald Hammon and Art By Cheri.

Artist's statement:

I feel the need to help the viewer to see with their hearts as well as with their eyes.

Cheri Hammon Awards

- 1996 PPA Certified
- 1996 Retouch Artist of the Year – PPA Wisconsin Regional Art Tech Competition
- 1997 PPA Master Artist Degree
- 2001 PPA Craftsman Degree
- 2001 Georgia Professional Photographers Assoc. - First Timer's Award
- 2002 Georgia Professional Photographers Assoc. - Dick Dickerson Award
- 2006 Georgia PPA - Photographer of the Year
- 2006 Georgia PPA Fellowship Degree
- 2009 PPA Master of Electronic Imaging Degree
- 2009 PPA Photographer of the Year - Bronze
- 2011 PPA Photographer of the Year - Bronze
- 2012 PPA Master Photographer Degree
- 2012 PPA Photographer of the Year - Silver
- 2013 PPA Photographer of the Year – Platinum
- 2013 Idaho Master Photographer of the Year
- 2014 PPA Photographer of the Year – Silver
- 2014 PPA - Image Excellence Award
- 2014 Idaho PPA - Master Photographer of the Year
- 2016 Idaho PPA Fellowship Degree

Cheri Hammon Work Experience

1986-1999 Fitz-Symms Photographers Augusta GA – retouch artist

1999-2003 Showcase Photo and Video - digital lab manager

2003-2006 HS Color Lab – retouch artist

2005-present Art By Cheri – painting/fine art printing

2006-present Richards Studio – retouch artist