

Curating my own Language

ASP Fellowship Thesis

Kristi Elias

M.Photog., M.Artist., Cr.Photog.

2018

Curating my own Language

Peter Pan had nothing on me. My childhood was spent scaling tree tops, easel-ing sidewalks, building bike ramps, racing the neighborhood boys, and navigating crocodiles while flying high as the pirate queen across our backyard monkey bars. Flooding our backyard was one of my first masterpieces. Despite the harsh critic reviews, I would not be deterred. I was always plotting, painting, creating and adventuring. Nothing was safe. Garage oil spills expanded, tools went missing and bark chips changed colors. As a teenager, even my bedroom walls became a canvas. Art was my imaginary friend, cathartic outlet, compass, and most importantly my voice when the written word failed me.

At the age of seven, I was diagnosed with severe dyslexia. It was 1982, dyslexia was very much an experimental study. When I asked my mother, “If we were meant to read, why are the letters moving all over the place?” She didn’t look at me like I was crazy, as teachers had. She did not call me a “liar,” as others had. She instantly knew what was wrong.-

I had trampoline reading classes, read with strange color tints over my pages, many different glasses and filters, we tried every experimental thing out there to stop the words from jumping sentences. Those words were fast, but so was my mother’s lasso. She became my reading warrior.

Now, I see my dyslexia as a blessing and a curse. Being different is something most adults celebrate, children not so much. Kids can be cruel, and they were. Being dyslexic means more than moving words, it is a different way of processing information. Dyslexics think in pictures, the picture grow as the thought process adds more complexities. Throughout my scholastic journey, we had many hurdles and even more tutors. Professional after professional opined, “This is the most extreme case of dyslexia I have ever seen.” Not exactly the trophy anyone wants to win, but remember a blessing and a curse. The dyslexia that haunted me as a child has made me more successful as an adult. It fuels how I see the world, and in turn how I create my worlds.

“Art has always been my rock, the one thing that made me unbreakable.”

As a child, there were two areas of study I had control of: art and athletics. When all the kids lined up to pick sports teams, I was always first draft. When the same kids lined up to pick spelling bee teams, I was benched. Around the age of eight, I remember a babysitter asking, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I quickly answered “An artist and Olympian.” She laughed and rolled her eyes. “As if” is what her face screamed to me. I vowed to prove her wrong. I vowed to prove them all wrong. I may not have been able to spell “successful,” but I swore I would be it.

Throughout high school, learning continued to be a daily battle. A treadmill on which no matter how fast I ran, I was always behind. There was a reprieve, a handful of classes I did not feel exposed in. My electives were everything art; from painting and drawing to ceramics. I took my first photography class when I was fifteen. I devoured learning about lighting, chemicals and the entire tactile process. This was my kind of science. By my second photography class, I started getting raised eyebrows from my teacher Mr. Dunton. I had been enthusiastically mixing chemicals and experimenting with alternative processes, none of which was even remotely allowed. So began my love affair with photography.

Mr. Dunton encouraged me to enter my first photography contest. I won that first contest, and then kept on winning. Everyone was proud of something *I did* at school. This was uncharted territory. My canvases were no longer just the walls of my bedroom, I now transformed our entire home into a photo studio. My little sister and her friends became my models. They found themselves painted, and even covered in oatmeal. Everything was about the art of photography.

Once I declared, “I am going to art school.” Nobody was surprised. We made an appointment and drove to Brooks Institute of Photography (“Brooks”) in Santa Barbara. As the large wrought iron gates opened to the Montecito campus, it was love at first sight. Brooks resembled more of a resort, than a school. We met the legendary Ernie Brooks on our tour. He graciously signed my Brooks book, which still sits center stage on my bookshelf.

During our tour, the admissions counselor was very clear, “graduation is not a guarantee.” Everyone seemed taken aback by this, not me. That was how I felt about every single solitary grade in school. Perfect I thought, sign me up. During our class orientation at Brooks, I turned to my mother and whispered, “These are my people.” I remember her smile, it mirrored mine.

My first day at Brooks was one I will never forget. My teacher, journalistic photographer Paul Liebhardt, looked at our class of twenty-five students. Then he said something along the lines of, “Take a good look at everyone around you. In six months, half of you will be gone, after one year more will be gone. Of the few who do graduate, only one or two will become full time professional photographers.” I looked around, surveying the fear in my classmates’ eyes. For me, there was no other choice. It was my turn. These were my people. I was going to graduate.

Throughout my years at Brooks, I met lifelong friends and watched all but four of my original classmates vanish. The Liebhardt prophesy rang true. The assignments at Brooks laid the foundation for my career. My toolbox is filled with words of wisdom from my esteemed professors. Paul Meyer telling me, “Focus on the details, no matter how small.” David Litchi saying, “Light from the back. Fill from the front.” Linda Lowell always pushing my creativity and encouraging, “Never see the road blocks. It doesn't matter if you are a woman in a man’s field, be so good they cannot ignore you!”

Annually at Brooks, Fuji had a portfolio contest. I was the winner for the first-year students. Fuji provided a monetary prize, plus my work was published in an industry magazine. Winning the Fuji contest meant I *could* do this. This set the bar for all my future assignments and contests. Other awards would follow during my time at Brooks. I discovered winning is as much of a habit, as losing is.

“One of the great pleasures in life is doing what people say you cannot do....”

I have always pushed limits, especially in creating with alternative processes. I strongly believe in the maxim, “If everyone understands your work, you are not trying hard enough.” For one of our last assignments, at Brooks, we had to create a self-portrait. The portrait would be displayed with our graduation portfolio gallery showing. Excitedly, I drove down to LA and purchased a six-foot mannequin. My next step was to paint my naked-self red. Then I photographed myself using a shutter release. I used the slides to create Polaroid transfers. Which I applied to the mannequin. My final piece took 350 Polaroid transfers and emulated the muscle structure of the human body. Eyebrows were raised, it wasn’t for everyone, but it spoke of me. My self-portrait remains one of my favorite creations, and would later showcase in a museum and couple of galleries.

During my last year of Brooks, it was suggested to me more than once, “You need to find a way to become more mainstream, apply your creativity in a sellable way. Or you will be a starving

artist.” The word “artist” I liked, “unemployed” and “starving” not so much. It would take years, but I would find a way to make my creativity mainstream.

Before graduating from Brooks, I began taking, art directing, night classes at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. I strived to make connections, and I did. One of my professors at the Art Center hired me for my first product photography job. Next, I turned to Brooks for guidance. My professors connected me with alumni working as fashion and commercial photographers. I was lucky enough to work as an intern on their sets, then as a paid assistant. I got my first break and magazine shoot as a referral from an alumnus. Soon, I was given celebrity editorial spreads. I refer to my first few years out of school as the feast or famish, better yet the Del Taco or Dolce & Gabbana years. I was determined.

Being referred to as “hyper active” my entire life, it was no surprise I did not enjoy the confines of the 9:00 to 5:00 world. I sought the thrill of the kill in finding new commercial work. Having always loved interior design and furniture, Z Gallerie was one of my lifelong crushes. As a student at Brooks, I discovered Z Gallerie on Main Street in Santa Barbara. I fantasied about having Z Gallerie as an account one day. When looking for commercial work, I would scour Monster.-com to see if companies were looking for new photo stylists or art directors.

One morning my unicorn appeared. Z Gallerie was looking for a new photo stylist. I created an aggressive, border line stalking, marketing campaign to gain the attention of the incoming stylist. This was my chance. New stylist, meant new photographer. After faxing, calling, emailing and mailing in promos to the new stylist, I finally received the call. Dressed in black with my portfolio in hand, I entered their boardroom. I sat at the end of a large table filled with the creative director, new photo stylist and owners of Z Gallerie. They handed me the current photographer’s work. Then they asked, “What would you do differently?”

I will never forget that moment. I felt the sweat rising. I looked down at his flawless work. I had six seconds to pull it together and come up with something to wow them. Auto-pilot took over and I started talking, likely while sweating.

I got a call later that day. My stomach dropped. They liked my, “creative direction.” I secured my dream account for six glorious years. Z Gallerie’s main location was in an historic building in Long Beach, California. I was given the third floor, a 3,000 square foot studio haven. After years of living and working in LA, I left the smog for the ocean breeze. I moved to Long Beach and I live there still.

Long Beach turned out to be my spot in the world. Soon after moving to Long Beach, I met my husband; and two years later we were married in Santorini, Greece. We temporarily relocated to Florida for my husband's job. In 2008, my son Skyler was born. He would prove to be my favorite model and truest muse.

Evolution of a Niche

While at Brooks, I took an assortment of classes exploring new interests and techniques. I never took a single solitary portrait class. I had zero interest. Zero. I was never a baby person. Pregnant people sent me running in the opposite direction. Family portraits were not for me, so what came next was very much the unexpected. After having my son, I of course, had to photograph him. My neighbors would come over and see the framed 30x40 of baby Skyler on my husband's arm. Soon they had requests. They wanted me to take pictures of their babies. *What?!* I wanted to scream and runaway. I could not say "no," though. They lived on our street.

Our neighbors hired me to take their family portraits, soon so did their friends. One of my neighbors pushed, "It would be a shame if you do not pursue portrait photography." Sometimes when you are on the cuff of a decision, one opinion can push you. Through a dreaded obligation, I opened the next chapter in my love affair with photography.

After two years in Florida, we relocated back to Long Beach, California. Moving and changing genres meant starting over. I was going to do fine art portrait photography my way. Rogue, color far outside the lines, dyslexic, different way of thinking kind of way. From the beginning, I decided how my business would run.

For the first time, I had to juggle family and career. I embraced the dentist office schedule 10:00-5:00 Monday through Friday, only. I sought to make the experience something clients would find worth taking time off from work for. I wanted to *resort* the portrait experience, just as Brooks had *resort-ed* the school experience for me. Champagne, wine, chocolate or whatever your indulgence may be, I offered. I was creating a niche that would not be for everyone, but not everyone was meant to be my client. After creating a solid portfolio and successful marketing campaign, my schedule was booked months out in advance. I exhaled. Then came some bumps and crashes. Learning, at times stumbling, through experiences, mistakes and even my clients' bad behavior, I quickly tightened my business process to a point that would make a military general proud.

“Success is on the other side of fear.”

At the start of my fine art portrait career, I did not have a studio. That lasted approximately two weeks before my husband came home from work to discover a family of five on the third floor of our home. After exclaiming, “Who are these people?” He quickly said, “Please go get a studio. Today!”

Four days and a trip to Calumet later, I was up and running with a fully equipped studio and signage. I hired a studio manager to handle bookings, order and viewing sessions. I could now focus on shooting, marketing and editing my clients’ orders.

Financial practicality had never been a strength of mine, math either. Numbers tend to bore me. “I am an artist, not an accountant” I say. On the other hand, enjoying lavish experiences always has been a strength of mine. I pick studio locations much the same. My first fine art portrait studio was located on 2nd street, home of hotspot restaurants and shops in Long Beach. Two years later, I had out grown my creative space. It was time to push myself and business to the next level.

Looking for my Holy Grail

I was on the hunt for wow. The kind of place clients long to lounge, and more importantly order portraits in. After months of searching, I found the perfect space. My space was an 1,800 square foot studio with thirty-foot vaulted wood beam ceilings on the water in Shoreline Village. Nineteen feet of ocean views; boats coming and going, seals and dolphins swimming by, the back view captured the world famous Queen Mary. I found my Holy Grail.

Going Underwater

People ask how I got into underwater photography, my reply, “We bought a house with a pool.” The answer really is, “We bought a pool with a house.” Water has always been my sanctuary. I spent every minute possible swimming in the backyard of our childhood home. Underwater, I could always escape. After years of searching for the perfect pool, I found it. Just like my waterfront studio, it had to happen. I started doing underwater sessions, even before we moved in.

There is an ethereal innocence that comes from all my underwater subjects. Maybe it is the free flowing movement of fabric and hair. Maybe it is their loss of all land inhibitions. No matter the genesis, I have fallen in love with the look, creation, and challenge of these portraits. I never marketed for underwater maternity, it sought me out. After adding an underwater gallery to my

website, a flood of inquiries for maternity shoots washed in. My pregnant clients love how weightless and beautiful they feel underwater. I love how they remind me of old world Renaissance paintings.

“Rising tides, lifts all boats.”

In 2009, I joined Professional Photographers of America and Wedding & Portrait Photographers International. PPA and WPPI have been essential to my growth as an artist and businesswoman. I've made great friendships along the way through both organizations. We all work as silent partners, helping each other through growing our businesses and the industry. Speaking and teaching through different organizations has allowed me to pause, examine and redefine my own process. I am constantly learning from my students, and hopefully vice versa. I am eternally grateful for the opportunities afforded through being a judge for print competitions. Absorbing each judge's perspective and unique background is an eye-opening experience. I have grown as an artist, photographer and person through the competition process.

Tales of a Portfolio

I would like to invite you on a journey throughout my portfolio, you will experience a collection of short stories each feeding into the cultivation of the portfolio's life.

At the heart of the body, you will experience an image entitled, *Ascending*. The ghostly woman, wearing a pensive expression, is holding the lifeless soul of her past. She carries her past as it ascends into the future. A future of a stronger self. She is framed by four images. The repetitious use of circles and ovals in the heart of the portfolio, represent eternity, timelessness and cyclical movement.

The image to her right *The Rise of the Fallen Angel* tells the story of breaking free from the criticism of others, and self-doubt. Proudly she rises from the darkness bearing her broken wings. The blue hued image, below her heart, represents the calmness after the storm. She is at peace in being herself.

The image below, *Ascending*, is a body of ethereal calmness titled *The Escape*. Tapping into the sense of euphoria of being underwater while also encasing the feeling of before and after the storm.

The image left of *Ascending* is *The Wrath of Venus* depicts a young woman of the Renaissance spirit in the throws of her life. A scene showcasing her breaking free from life's restraints. There is a sense of freeing chaos. A confidence consumes her. Surrounding her are symbolic figures of power.

The image found directly above *Ascending* is representative of re-birth. The image, *The Birth of Aphrodite*, is an underwater portrait depicting a young woman encased in an egg like form. She is metamorphosing, she is rising.

You will notice an aura of defiance in each of the storytellers in my portfolio. Their confidence is rooted in this defiance and notion of re-birth. They decide their future, no matter the past given to them. Each orator bears their sole, in the hope of opening a window to your imagination.

Creating fine art portraiture is the language, in which I tell stories. My creativity proved to be mainstream, without sacrificing my dark whimsical ideas. Each final creation serves as my cathartic outlet.

The characters in my portraits are meant to be unattainable. They are not only portraits of my clients, they are pictures of their essence. Showcasing the shadows within and the light only brought out through art.

From mermaids, magicians, underwater vampires, pirate queens, to ethereal goddesses and more the cast of characters before you make up my world. My use of cohesive color palettes whisper of times long ago, highlighting the cyclical story of life. Re-birth does not come without the exploration of the past.

My images are printed on Hahnemühle fine art Baryta paper to showcase the full tonal range in the images in my portfolio.

Create what you Crave

Darkness calms me. It is my spirit animal. There is peacefulness in the macabre. At the age of eight, I took my first oil painting class. I was one of the only children in a room full of adults. Our instructor taught with a Bob Ross type style. We were given two choices to paint, a morning or night lake scene. I chose the night, with ravens. That was the moment I fell in love with the details that can be found in the shadows. The way moon light opens and unveils subtle stories. My finished painting lives tucked away in a closet at my parents' home. If you were to hang it next to my current work, you would see the evolution of a maker. I do not see in high key

palettes, nor do I create with them. When I enter a museum or gallery, I beeline to the darkest piece in the room. That is home to me. Where others see darkness, I see light.

I create what I crave. A portrait capable of swallowing the observer. A star-able piece of art. Each observer, unearthing their own story in the subtleties. I am constantly evolving, discovering how to be the best storyteller I can.

I get asked, “How do you create a unique style?” My answer is simple, “Leave behind any thoughts of acceptance. Create what you crave.”

Photoshop is my other spirit animal. I use it in a very raw and natural way. My oversized Wacom tablet serves as my canvas. Photoshop tools are my art supplies all laid out on the table ready for creation. I want my subjects to visually feel 3D. As if the observer can reach into the portrait and touch the subjects, or climb into the frame and converse. I travel the world capturing moments and backdrops to tell their stories.

Art guides me. I am forever mesmerized by the lighting and editorial poses of Annie Leibovitz’s portraits. The texture, colors and lighting of Rembrandt’s paintings have been of refuge of mine for decades. Everything the master Leonard Da Vinci created breaths inspiration into me.

As image makers, portrait artists, are tasked with the responsibility of peeling back the emotional layers of our clients. We have the opportunity to bare facets of their souls. We empower with canvas confidence. Through portraits, clients are reminded of the strength that dwells within. A portrait serves as a daily affirmation, hung in a frame, on the wall of their chosen sanctuary. I create portraits for clients who dance in their walls. I live to defy limitations, create, explore and expand. I still may spell in a manner my sister kindly dubs “creative,” but the written word will never slow me down. Photography is my language, a language where words jumping sentences is a thing to celebrate, not condemn. Peter Pan still has nothing on me. I may have grown up, but my imagination never will.

“For the art that we do not create, no one will.”

Bio

Kristi Elias, M.Photog. M.Artist. Cr.Photog

Master Artist, Craftsman and Master photographer Kristi Sutton Elias has been an artist all of her life. Earning her degree from Brooks Institute of Photography of Santa Barbara in 1998, she’s

worked as a professional photographer and gallery represented artist for the past 20 years. With an artist's eye and a poetic soul, Kristi merges her artistic energy and creativity into fine art portraiture, creating pieces that show her identifiable mystic and timeless style.

From sketch to sculpture, Kristi's passion for fine art photography has brought her to the forefront of the photography world, and she has been featured on NBC News, in museums, art galleries, billboards, storefront window displays, Magazine covers and ads as well as in numerous industry magazines like Professional Photographer and Rangefinder Magazine.

Kristi has earned numerous awards and international recognition. Including multiple Photographer of the Year Medallions, California Photographer of the Year Awards, Canon Par Excellence awards, ASP State Elite and District Awards, PPA Loan Collection images. Selected on Team USA for the World Photographic cup and over 90 WPPI Honors of Excellence Awards. Kristi has recently been accepted into the prestigious group Camera Craftsman of America.

Kristi owns a luxury based fine art portrait studio and art gallery located on the water in Shoreline Village of Long Beach California. In 2016 she also opened an underwater photography studio in Long Beach California.

She's extremely involved in her industry as a member of the American Society of Photographers, Professional Photographers of California, Wedding and Portrait Photographers International, and PPA, where she serves as a Council Member. Kristi believes in giving back and helping to grow the photography industry, achieving this through her roles as photographic mentor, teacher, author, and image competition judge.

Kristi is now speaking and sharing her success with other photographers across the United States and Internationally, giving back to the profession that has given her so much.