

Susan Burnstine



Photography doesn't always have to be about pin sharp focus and capturing every last detail – especially when you're an animal-mad toy camera obsessive like Susan Burnstine, as Ailsa McWhinnie discovers

WHEN I PHONE Los Angeles-based photographer, Susan Burnstine, from our office in East Sussex, I'm slightly anxious. It's 9.30am UK time, and although Susan has insisted in a previous e-mail that it's fine to phone at 1.30am her time, I'm still not convinced. So it is with some relief that I hear the voice at the end of the line – not sounding too sleepy. 'I get most of my work done after midnight,' is one of the first things she says.

The majority of creative people I know keep similar waking hours, and their energy never fails to amaze me. Susan is no exception. Her bread and butter work is in headshots, portraits and weddings, but it's once she's shaken off the shackles of fine grain and front-to-back focus that the fun really begins. Because Susan has a thing about plastic. The cheaper and, frankly, crappier the lens and build, the better as far as she's concerned. Holgas, Dianas, Lubitels, and other even more obscure makes, she's run film through them all – and her strange, quirkily blurry images are the result.

It was only 18 months ago, when a friend gave her a Holga, that she discovered the joy of the toy camera. It was perfect timing, as she had been feeling somewhat burned out by photography – and not for the first time. At the age of 14, Susan was working for Joel Schachtel, one of Chicago's top photographers. She stayed there until she

was 21, by which time she was ready for a change. The following few years saw her do everything from stand-up comedy, to acting, writing and script consultancy. But, as with many things in life, she has come full circle and is now immersed in photography once more.

Since that fateful introduction to toy cameras, she has gone on to build her own lenses and hack into the camera bodies to adapt them. Well, with an initial outlay of only a few dollars for the camera in the first place, the odd slip of the screwdriver isn't too catastrophic.

Susan is somewhat secretive about the components that go to make up her home made lens, but she goes as far as revealing that it is constructed from 'garbage bags, plastic – and I keep stealing parts from my friend's child's science kit!' And the incredible thing about it is that it has full tilt/shift capabilities. 'It sounds stupidly simple but when you try it it's complicated.' With utmost clarity, she adds, 'To work it you kind of squish it in and out.' I worry the late hour might be getting to her, but gallantly she continues.

In terms of subject matter many things inspire her, but particularly animals – specifically her dog, Blue, an Australian kelpie, whose nose features over the page. 'I'm kind of an animal maniac,' she reveals. 'I'm always drawn to them because they make me laugh. I like to humanise them in my pictures.'

However, there is also a melancholy side to her photographs. 'Someone once summed me up as "encapsulating the loneliness in my subjects",' she reveals. 'But at the same time I like to capture the essence of something's spirit – and you can find that in a subject anywhere.'

Unfortunately the one place Susan struggles to find it is in Los Angeles. 'I find LA dull, visually,' she admits. 'I like to go away and feel the newness of things.' Fortunately, for her latest series on deserts, it's not too far a journey into the nearby Mojave.

With the voice at the other end of the line showing hints of sleepiness, I draw our chat to a close. But even so, Susan's sense of fun comes through loud and clear. There's nothing like a toy camera to inject a bit of fun into photography, as her pictures clearly demonstrate. **B&W**

When shooting on her home made cameras, or the Diana, Susan finds she needs an ISO 400 film such as Ilford HP5 Plus, whereas her home made lenses have a very wide aperture, so she can get away with something like Fuji Acros 100. When processing the films, she overcooks a little to get a punch from the negatives.

If printing conventionally in her local hire darkroom, she uses Ilford Multigrade paper, while her favourite digital paper is Hahnemuehle Photo Rag and German Etching.



You talkin' to me?

Diana modified with close-up lens, Ilford HP5 Plus



Blue's nose
Plastic home made tilt/shift lens and close-up lenses on a Great Wall body, Fuji Acros 100



ABOVE LEFT Let's go, let's go

Plastic home made tilt/shift with close-up lenses on a modified Great Wall body, Fuji Acros 100

ABOVE Sniff

Diana modified with close-up lens, Ilford Delta 400

LEFT Supermodel Meg

Home made plastic tilt/shift lens with close-up lenses on a modified Great Wall body, Fuji Acros 100



Once a dream

Modified Diana with plastic home made tilt/shift lens, Fuji Acros 100



Battersea Power Station

Plastic home made tilt/shift lens on a modified Great Wall body, Fuji Acros 100

■ You can see more of Susan's work at www.susanburnstine.com, and read her blog at www.outafocus.com