

dream scene

behind the lens
of homemade
cameras with
susan burnstine

b y r o n n i e l . g a r r e t t

A pile of plastic, rubber, and odds and ends from common household items might appear to most as just a bunch of garbage. But one person's trash really is another's treasure, especially to fine art photographer Susan Burnstine, who takes things others might toss away, adds a dose of cinema foil and Duco cement, and fashions them into the cameras she uses to create works of photographic art.

Each homemade camera possesses a name and purpose uniquely its own, offering one aperture and one to three shutter speeds. Stacking filters and manipulating their makeshift bellows controls the light coming in. The images she creates with these rudimentary systems foster a look that's uniquely Susan Burnstine.

"My main inspiration for crafting my own cameras and lenses was to have a look no one else had—a signature look," she says, explaining she discovered the joy of the toy camera when a friend gave her a Holga. But as much joy as she found capturing images with these plastic, light-leaking systems, she recalls they sparked just as much frustration.

"I would make telephotos and macros and do all these weird things with them, but the images still looked like they came from toy cameras," she says. Dismantling these simple systems taught Susan valuable lessons on camera operation and

technique. But ultimately building her own cameras seemed the only way to get the look she craved.

"I literally taught myself to build a camera. They are very simple objects," she states. Even so, each of Susan's creations takes approximately 40 hours to build in a painstakingly involved process that includes molding lenses out of plastic and fashioning bellows out of trash bags. "There are times where I feel like throwing them against the wall. In fact, I think I have a few times," she laughs.

Susan completed her first camera in March 2005 and captured what she deems her first successful shot in June of that year. The Los Angeles-based artist photographed "In Passage" from an elevated walkway in London's Paddington Station just a week before the 2005 London transit system bombings. This ethereal image became the first in her "On Waking Dreams" series, the first installment in her trilogy "Within Shadows."

Today prestigious galleries across the U.S., including The Susan Spiritus Gallery in Newport Beach, CA; Verve Gallery of Photography in Santa Fe, NM; Kevin Longino Fine Photographs in Greenwich, CT; Wall Space Gallery in Seattle, WA; and John Cleary Gallery in Houston, TX; represent the Chicago native's breakthrough work, recently nominated for the 2009

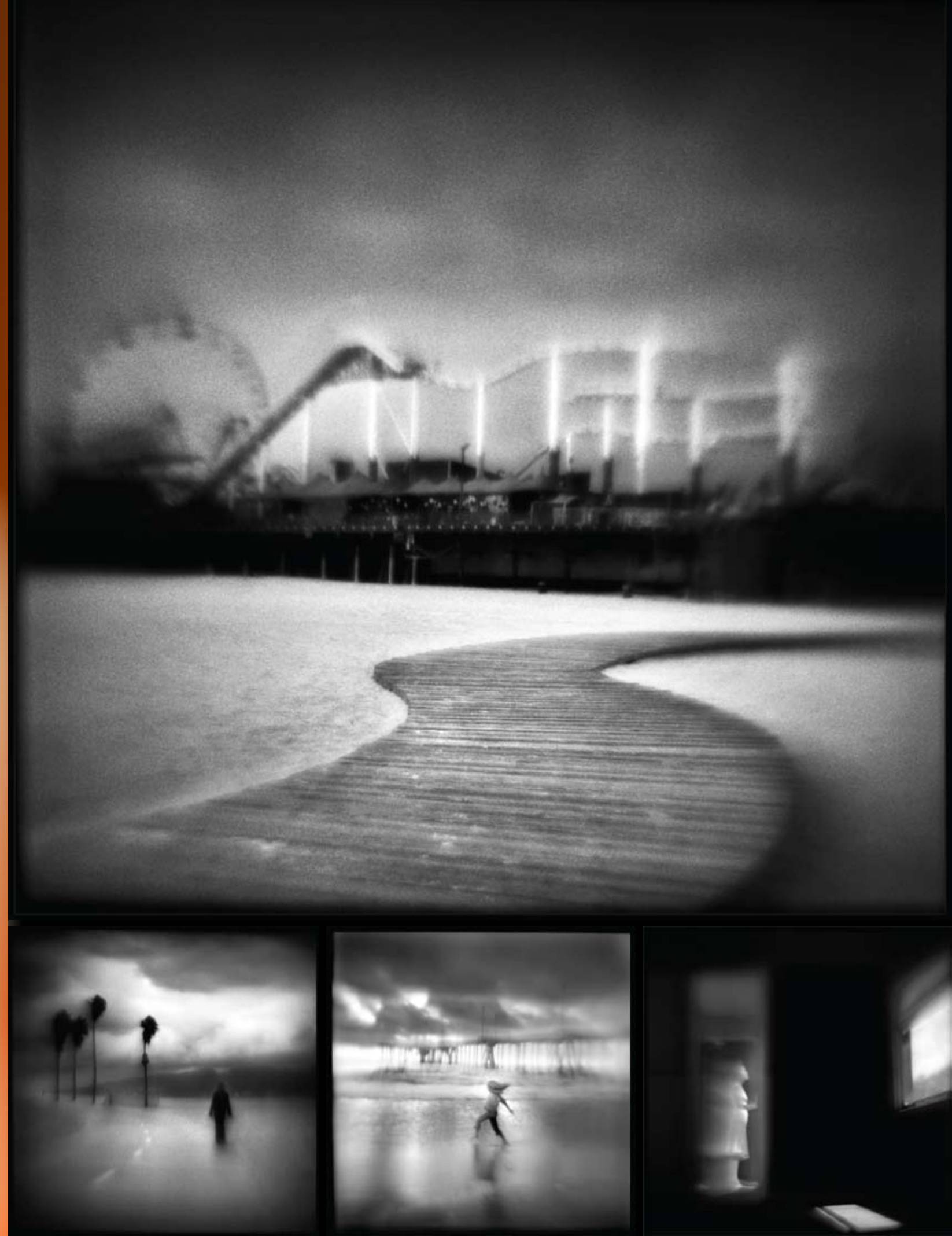
Santa Fe Prize for Photography and earning the 2008 Portfolio Spotlight Award from *B&W Magazine*.

Tinkering with Toys

The successful outcome of tinkering with toys came at exactly the right time for Susan, who explains her interpretive work keeps her from burning out in the photography world, where commercial photography remains her bread and butter.

She explains she's lived many lives as a photographer. She discovered her vision behind the lens at 8 years old when her mother gave her an old vintage camera. By 14, Susan worked for one of Chicago's top commercial photographers. She remained there though college, convinced she would specialize in commercial photography upon graduation. But at age 21 Susan walked away from photography altogether to pursue a career in the entertainment world as a performer and screenwriter.

The deaths of her mother and a close friend pushed Susan, then in her thirties, to find greater meaning in her life, causing her to pick up the camera once again. Susan adds she can almost hear her mother cheering her on with every shutter click. She began shooting headshots, portraits, weddings—whatever paid the bills—but quickly found the work left her unfulfilled.





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Within two years, the earlier feelings of disillusionment resurfaced but this time Susan refueled her passion through a new interpretation of light behind the lenses of cameras she built herself.

Dreamwalker

The following quotation from psychiatrist Carl Jung introduces Susan's artist's statement on her Web site at www.susanburnstine.com: "Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes." The fitting message embodies everything she strives to reveal within her art. Her ongoing body of work, "Within Shadows," presented in three successive chapters—"On Waking Dreams," "Between" and "Flight"—explores three states of mind: dreaming

(subconscious), sleeping (unconscious), and waking (conscious).

To create authentic expressions of her subconscious, unconscious and conscious mind, Susan recalls a single metaphor,

"I have to be in a state of mind where I'm half awake and half sleeping while I'm shooting," she states. "It sounds crazy, but it's really true. I like to go when I first wake up and I'm still in that fuzzy state."

"A lot will show up on film that you don't know is there. That's the magic of film."

contemplative moment or pathway into the unknown from a dream she had the night before. She then captures the fading memory on film using details from her own imagination to explore "her collective unconscious."

The quest to unearth her dream metaphors begins first thing in the morning.

Though Susan shoots with a Nikon digital SLRs in her commercial work, she prefers capturing fine art images on Ilford FP4 Plus, Ilford HP5 Plus or Fuji Acros film, which adequately handles the lighting limitations of the sunny California climate.

Digital photography might more eas-

ily address the lighting challenges she faces, but Susan explains it doesn't deliver the authenticity and truth she seeks, especially in black and white. "A lot will show up on film that you don't know is there," she says. "That's the magic of film. I love not knowing what I'm going to get and having my hands on that film. It's very tactile. You don't get that in digital—you're looking at a computer screen."

Working with film in such an introspective state of mind requires complete technical mastery in order to maintain focus on her emotions. "I definitely had to learn guerilla photography making," she says. "When you're using a camera with aperture priority or something like that, you're not tested as much as when you have only one or two shutter speeds. I need complete control of the basics so they are second nature."

Because Susan seeks to express her imagination entirely in-camera without substantial postprocessing manipulations, she crafts every camera to uniquely handle the light. "Each camera has different focal lengths, one to three shutter speeds and doesn't go any faster than $\frac{1}{200}$ to $\frac{1}{250}$ of a second," she says. "I bring two to three with me when I shoot. Los Angeles light can be terrible." She also stacks different filters atop their rudimentary lenses to interpret light as she desires.

Susan shoots intuitively, rather than focusing on the mechanics. In "On Waking Dreams," viewers see figures in silhouette and from a distance, which she says reflects solitude and the struggle of being alone in conscious and unconscious human conditions. For these images, Susan lets the world speak to her, capturing real-life scenarios revealing the thought-provoking qualities of her dreams. Though individuals remain obscured by blur and other means in "Between," Susan invites viewers to identify with them on a deeper, more emotional level. This series represents a painful period in her own life, so for these "self-portraits," Susan gave models a word to reflect upon and asked them to personalize it, then waited until the moment mimicked the emotions of her dream. The final series, "Flight," relies on a mixture of both techniques.



Back to Business

Sometimes her fine art photography's business side prevents Susan from shooting as much as she'd like. Making prints, sending them out, doing exhibitions—while necessary evils in the fine art world—can suck the artist well dry. In fact, Susan recently put "Flight" on hold for two months after being picked up by another gallery.

"It's taxing sometimes because I'm not

doing what I should do in terms of creativity," she admits.

She advises other photographers to constantly challenge themselves and make time for their personal art. "Life gets in the way of being an artist," she stresses. "You need time where you shoot just for you. I need to look at things differently every single time to keep changing my perspective and finding a new one."

Find the balance—the words may be a

good mantra for every fine art photographer. "My art is so much a part of me that if I don't make the time to do it, I start to get a little wacky," she says. "I've got to create the art, so I find the time." Susan's commitment to herself and her art keeps the photography of her dreams fueling her soul.

Ronnie Garrett is a freelance writer and photographer based in the Midwest.