

Shadow & Light Magazine

The Art of Photography

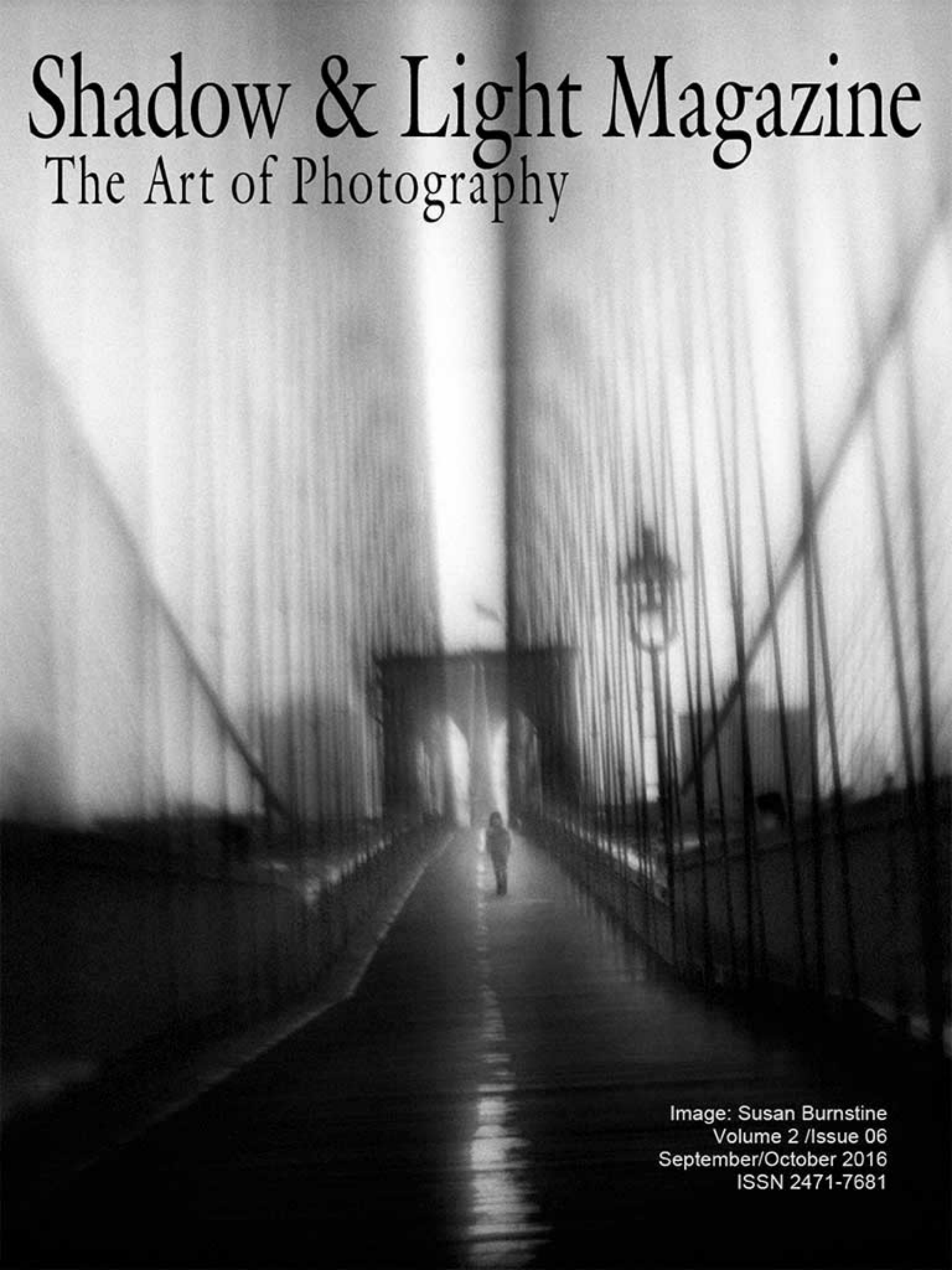


Image: Susan Burnstine
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Featured Photographer

Susan Burnstine

by Tim Anderson



California and Stockton, 8:02am. ©Susan Burnstine

Since we first met, Susan, more than 10 years-ago, much has happened. You have gained world-wide recognition with articles printed in Thailand, Italy, Germany, South Korea, and China to name a few. With all the accolades I am thankful to be able to spend a few minutes with you.

Tim Anderson: In 2005 I published the winners of the Krappy Kamera 8 contest. In that piece, your iconic image, "Blue's Nose," was included. Looking back can you tell me what it was like to see that image, perhaps your all-time personal favorite, included in the list of winners? Did you have any awareness that it would be just the beginning?

Susan Burnstine: Honestly, no. I had no idea. "Blue's Nose" was a test shot for the first handmade camera and lens prototype I created. I had spent the year trying to perfect a homemade camera and lens and decided to finally give it a test run in my backyard. When I saw the way the light was hitting Blue's face, I grabbed my camera and shot four frames. After I developed the film and saw the results on the negative, I can honestly say that it was one of the most exciting moments for me in all my years of being a photographer. Mostly because at that moment, I realized I had found an aesthetic that seamlessly mirrored the way I experience my unconscious world.

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End of the Turnagain. ©Susan Burnstine



Until the Sky Fades Away. ©Susan Burnstine

I never viewed that image as a beginning beyond a means to creating a personal language and style. Matter of fact, I don't even think I knew what a fine art photographer was at the time. Creating images was merely a means to help me reimagine and cope with night terrors I experienced from the night before and that helped me work through the debilitating effects in my waking world. Using this type of art therapy to cope was something my mother taught me at the age of four and it's remained a tool I've used ever since.

TA: Like many of us, our first exposure to photography came through a camera that either our family or a friend gave us. You were eight when your mother gave you a vintage camera. And by the time you were 14, you were working for one of Chicago's premier commercial photographers. Then shortly after college you left for the world of entertainment. What precipitated that departure and what pulled you back.

SB: From the age of eight until eighteen I completely immersed myself in photography. It has always been my great passion. But when I began working for a commercial and event photographer, my passion turned into a means to make money rather than personal expression, so I burned out at a much too early age. I decided to switch it up and go to film school, then I moved to Los Angeles where I worked in the entertainment industry for many years. But my world was shattered in my early thirties when my mother was tragically killed at the age of fifty-six.



Through the Cracks. ©Susan Burnstine

Dragging myself to work for a production company every day became extremely unfulfilling, so I quit the world of entertainment and set out to find a new direction. I returned to photography and started shooting headshots, events... but despite making decent money, it was unfulfilling as I was having a hard time coping with the loss of my mother. Her death sparked the worst span of night terrors I've experienced, so as a means to cope and also as a way to honor my mother, I started journaling my night terrors as I awoke, then attempting to photograph them. I struggled to find the right camera that could emulate how my unconscious world appears.... Until finally, my father suggested I just make my own camera and lens. The rest is history.

TA: While many of us seem to struggle to remember even a moment from a dream, you seem to be



Lost in Mississippi. ©Susan Burnstine

unique in that you not only remember them, but they are the main theme of your fine art work. How do your dreams manifest themselves into fine art photography? Work for which collectors “wait in line to purchase.”

SB: As far as the technical aspects, I think I answered much of that in the former question. But as far as landing myself in fine art photography—that was not planned at all. Every image I create is intensely personal and solely produced for myself. I never think of others or what they might want to view or purchase when I make a photograph. But I am truly honored that others identify with my imagery and enjoy it enough to purchase and display on their walls. There’s really no greater compliment.

TA: Much has been written about the hand-made cameras you build to capture these ethereal moments, and how both your father and brother were instrumental in their inception. Why not use digital, which would seemingly afford you greater latitude in capturing these images?

SB: Mostly, because I don’t know how to make a digital camera. That, and I have a longtime, great love affair with film. It’s authentic, tactile and organic to me. Don’t get me wrong, I respect digital as it’s a



Hubbard & Wells, 9:18am. ©Susan Burnstine

remarkable tool. And if I could achieve the kind of authenticity I create with my homemade cameras using digital tools, I just might do it. But alas, I have tested my homemade lenses on DSLR's, and thus far, I've not experienced results that speak to me.

TA: In 2008 you filmed a piece for fine art tv. How did that come about and what was it like to bare yourself so personally in front of the camera's lens and talk about your dreams and the challenges they represent in your daily life. As you said in that film, you live, "between the worlds of life and death and dreams."

SB: Goodness gracious, how'd you dig that old film up? I met the filmmakers when I was exhibiting my work at a print walk for the Palm Springs Photo Festival. They came by, viewed my work and asked if they could do a short documentary on me at my place in Los Angeles. They were super nice people, so I agreed. But they ended up showing up pretty late at night and I was near half-asleep when they finally began shooting... So to be honest, I was too tired to have any social filter. But yes, what I said is accurate. Night terrors make the waking world challenging at times. Often, it's like living between unconscious and conscious worlds and not being able to bridge the gap between. Also, my principal motivation for creating this work is driven by the theme of life, death and mortality for others and myself. Thus, these core themes are interwoven throughout my life and art.



The Last Goodbye. ©Susan Burnstine

TA: In a previous article you wrote, "As in life, these images reveal that things are never as simple as black and white. What matters is what lies between," in reference to the series, "Between." Since the majority of your work concerns these issues described in this question as well as the one above, how do you separate one series from the other?

SB: Each "series" I've created are representations of chapters in my waking life so every image becomes a self-portrait as such. Once I work through a specific period in my life, my conscious and unconscious existence faces another life challenge, Subsequently, another chapter begins and that sparks a new series. At least that's how it's worked so far for me.

TA: I just completed a new image, "Angel," that took at least five-years to realize. I didn't even know it was something that was important to me until I saw the final piece. It completed the puzzle. Do you sometimes have to wait for long periods of time before your "puzzles" complete themselves?

SB: Yes and no. When I create an individual image it's a direct response to the night terror that inspired it. Typically, I create the corresponding image on the same day as the dream occurred. When considering how the images come together as a series and/or the chapter of my life it represents, it takes a long time for the "puzzle" to complete since I have to live my life and search for answers daily that help me peel back the layers and allow the pieces fall into place.

TA: How do you find the time and/or the desire to write for publications, especially ones that require a regular publication schedule? For example, Black & White Photography Magazine (UK).

SB: I'm an insomniac due to my sleep issues... It's pretty amazing what you can get done on four hours of sleep a day.



River North, 4:58pm. ©Susan Burnstine

Writing is and has always been one of my great passions. So my desire to write the column never falters and I remain just as thrilled to write for B+W Photography today as I did when I began working for them in 2007. It's a great privilege to get the chance to write about so many inspiring artists and working for my editor Elizabeth Roberts and deputy editor Mark Bentley has been terrific.

TA: Your new book, "Absence of Being," has just been released. Its predecessor, "Within Shadows," is sold out and received many accolades and awards. What do you hope for "Absence of Being?" And what do you hope for its viewer?

SB: That's a hard one..."Absence of Being" was such a personal book and I took a lot of creative risks by weaving personal excerpts from my dream journals into the pages. Most who read the excerpts while I was in the design phase weren't sure I should take the risk of exposing myself in such a raw manner. Their lack of confidence made me question if the book would be accepted as I envisioned it, but it was essential to me to convey how my creative process works so I pushed on and remained true to my vision. In the end, all I can hope for is that others enter my world and viscerally experience it within the pages in my book. If I achieve that, then the book was a success for both the viewer and myself.

TA: Now that this book is completed, what is next? A weekend in the Bahamas, sipping a really cold margarita? Or... perhaps it's a worldwide tour in support of the book?

SB: A margarita sounds perfect! ○



Impasse, ©Susan Burnstine (cover image)



What Was Then. ©Susan Burnstine



Bixby Bridge. ©Susan Burnstine



Ghost Ranch, 6:28pm. ©Susan Burnstine



Last Light Abiquiu. ©Susan Burnstine