

Right: "Two Profiles," from Tenneson's book *Illuminations*. Below: "Kristin," the book's cover image. Opposite: "Two Women," from *Transformations*.



joyce tenneson

Her work may seem touched by an angel, but its signature style is grounded in simple technique and a passionate belief that photography is about **self-discovery.**

Joyce Tenneson has remarkable artistic staying power. In the last 25 years, she has had more than a hundred one-person exhibitions and produced five books. The demand for her prints by collectors is strong. Her instantly recognizable style, with its ethereal tones, muted palette, and vaguely mythologic references, has struck a chord. Yet the popularity of her work goes beyond style, having much to do with the personal nature of its "myths." "The mystery of Joyce's images is what makes them so universally appealing," says Janet Bush, Tenneson's editor at Bulfinch Press, which has just published *Illuminations*, the photographer's latest book. "People can project their own feelings and fantasies on them."

The recent cultural interest in spirituality has only reinforced Tenneson's impact—not just as a photographer but as mentor to other photographers. She is a major attraction at photographic workshops. (She will be featured at a retreat for women photographers from May 9 to 13 organized by the Santa Fe Workshops—see page 24). Some students arrive ready to be touched by an angel, their portfolios full of Tenneson knockoffs. "They'll show me work full of draped fabric and classical props—sentimental stuff," says the photographer. "But most come because they want to move on to the next step photographically, and they know I view workshops as a way to foster growth—both spiritual and artistic."

The most important event in Tenneson's own growth may have been her mid-1980s move from Washington, D.C., where she had worked in black and white and taught at local art schools for over a decade, to New York, where she made the transition to color and began to do commercial work. Her signature style survived both changes. *Time* magazine—one of a long list of editorial clients that also includes *Premiere* and *The New York Times Magazine*—recently used one of her images on its cover for a lead story on spirituality.

Though Tenneson's style begs questions of craft, the photographer says it involves little manipulation. "People

think there's some sort of secret to it, but there isn't," she says. The seemingly internal light in Tenneson's subjects, for example, comes from simply flooding the subject with softboxes—enough for a nearly shadowless effect. Tones and edges are often further softened with double exposures; the subject may move between exposures, creating a blur, or be rendered pale or even ghostly by a second exposure of the background by itself. Tenneson once daubed her subjects in white limestone powder to enhance that pallor, but rarely uses makeup anymore. Tenneson's preferred film—plain-vanilla Kodak Ektachrome



© JOYCE TENNESON (3)

The recent interest in spirituality has reinforced Tenneson's impact.

■ **ON BOOKS** I'm very lucky to have had five books published. It's rare for a serious photographer to get out so many books that are basically monographs, rather than on particular subjects—cats, or baseball. A book is of immense value professionally, of course. But for me, a book is also important on a personal level. It puts a kind of closure on a period of your artistic life. It lets you step back and look at what you've done in a more objective way. It frees you up, psychologically, to move on to different things. As I look at all my books (which have been spaced about five years apart), I think of who I was at that moment in my life—and realize I might not have gone on to do the work that followed without the distance each book gave me. If I had to choose, I'd do books rather than exhibiting my photographs. They're much more work than a show, but they're also a permanent, living record of your artistic journey.

■ **ON BODIES** I've always been fascinated by bodies, of all types and ages. I love the way skin metamorphoses over time, from infancy to old age. I think the human figure's constant change and amazing variety are part of why it has preoccupied artists throughout history. Every person is different, every age is different, and the body seems to mirror what you put next to it—stone, fabric, foliage. Yet when I photograph people's bodies I feel I'm seeing a manifestation of something in-

ternal. People often ask me at my lectures if my subjects are embarrassed about revealing themselves to me, and the answer is no. I think the people I choose to photograph know that I find them exceptional and interesting in a physical and spiritual way, and that overcomes any hesitation they might have.

■ **ON SHOOTING** I rarely sleep the night before a big shoot. I'm thinking too hard about who I'm going to be photographing, and I'm nervous about doing something that



© JOYCE TENNESON

“pushes” me. Once I'm shooting, though, I work quickly. This surprises people, because my work looks very meditative. Yet I'm not at all meditative on the set. Nor do I discuss weighty things with my subjects. We actually have fun: We tell personal stories, we talk about our love lives, we laugh. Of course there's also a deeper connection being made at the same time. Taking pictures is actually the happiest part of my life. When it's going well, I get a physical high from it. And I know as soon as a session is over whether the results will be great or just good—without ever looking at the film.



Above: “Mother and Daughter,” from *Illuminations*. Below: actress Demi Moore, for a *Premiere* magazine profile. Right: Joyce Tenneson.

100 (EPN)—aids the pictures' desaturated quality, having been spared the pumped-up color that is now the norm.

Tenneson's technique varies with format, and she loads everything from 35mm to 4x5 for a shoot. With 35mm (the Canon EOS-1N), a long exposure might be the order of the day; with medium- and large-format, a double exposure more typical. “Recently I've been using the Canon because I enjoy the freedom of it—just carrying on a conversation with my finger on the shutter button,” she says. Yet Tenneson has little enthusiasm for discussions of technique. “Making photographs is about going deep within yourself and discovering something unique,” she says. “I think that's the only way to find your style.” —RUSSELL HART



