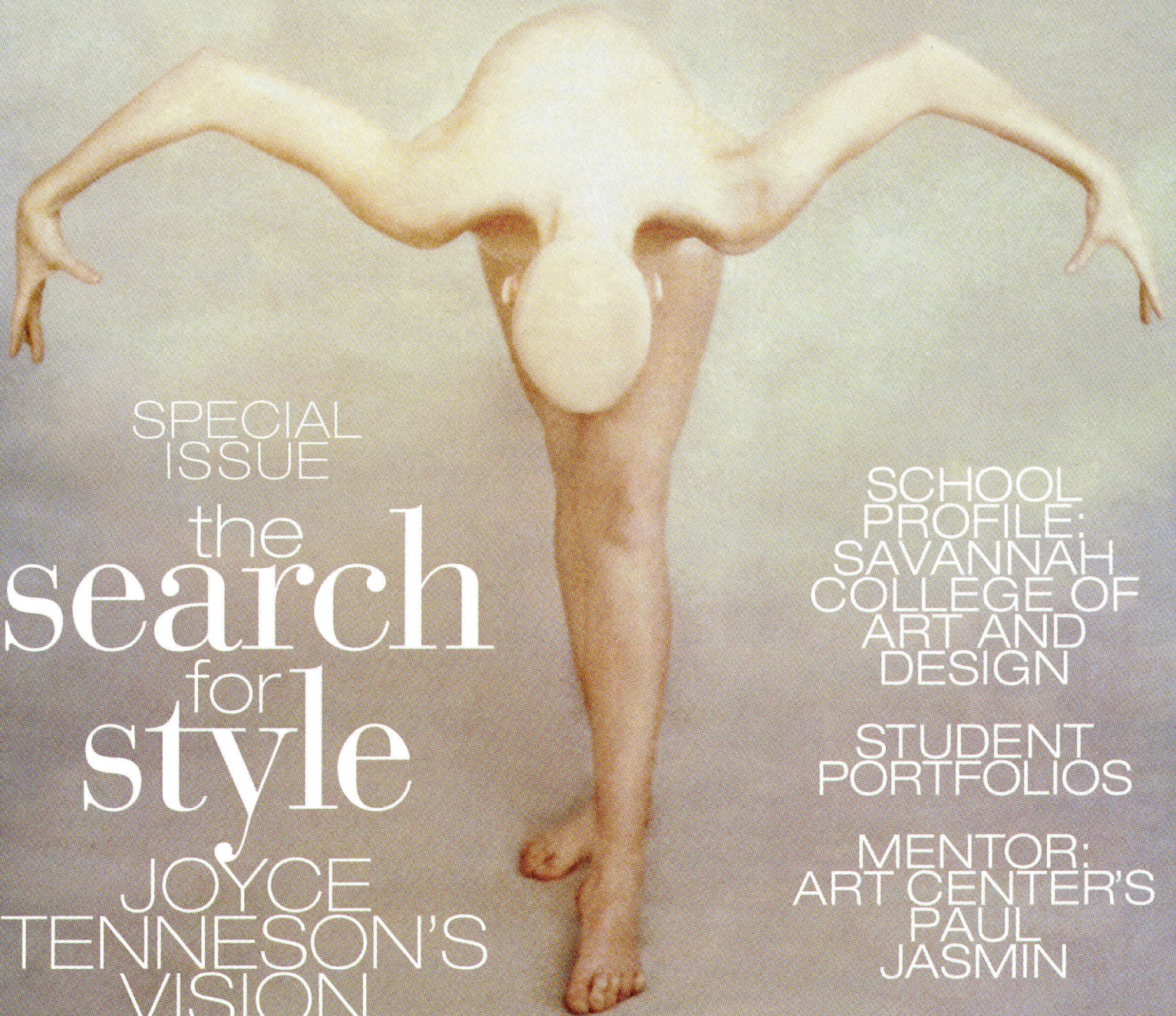


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SPECIAL
ISSUE

the
search
for
style

JOYCE
TENNESON'S
VISION
QUEST

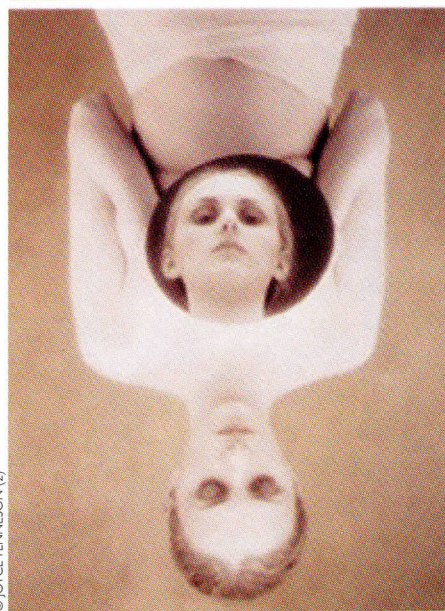
SCHOOL
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PAUL
JASMIN

For
Joyce Tenneson,
photographic
style can
come only from
within.
By Russell Hart

visionquest



any photographer searching for a personal style should look to Joyce Tenneson's example. Her work is instantly recognizable: Its ethereal tones, muted palette, and seemingly mythological references have found an audience that defies categorization. Yet Tenneson's visual signature isn't the product of flashy technique or faddish content. "For me, 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."

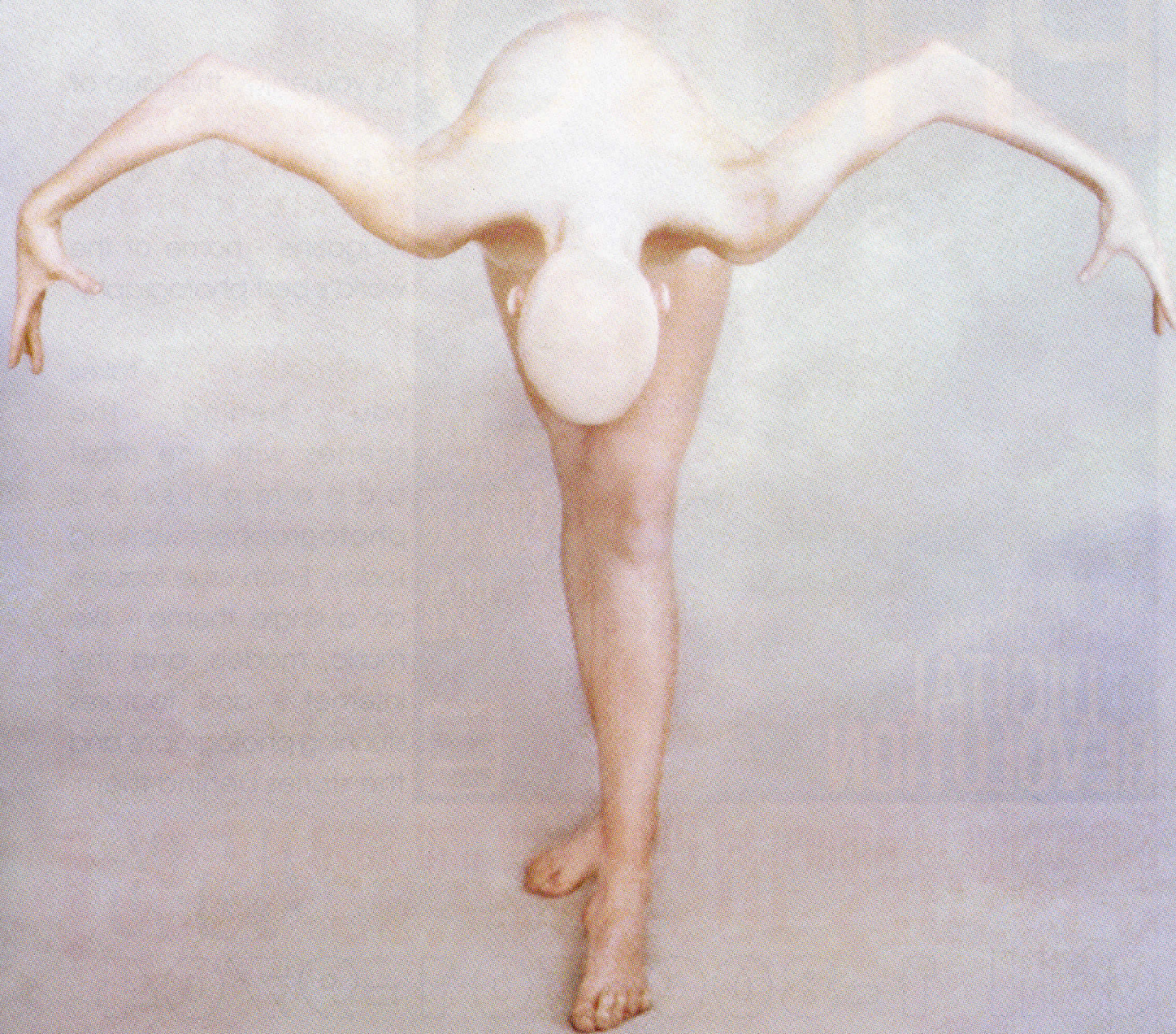
Indeed, photographers struggling with their own stylistic identity flock to Tenneson's many workshops—some of them with portfolios of Tenneson knockoffs. "They'll show me work full of draped fabric and classical props—sentimental stuff," says the photographer, who is loathe to turn out "Joyce Tenneson clones." Those students seem to be seeking a style from the outside

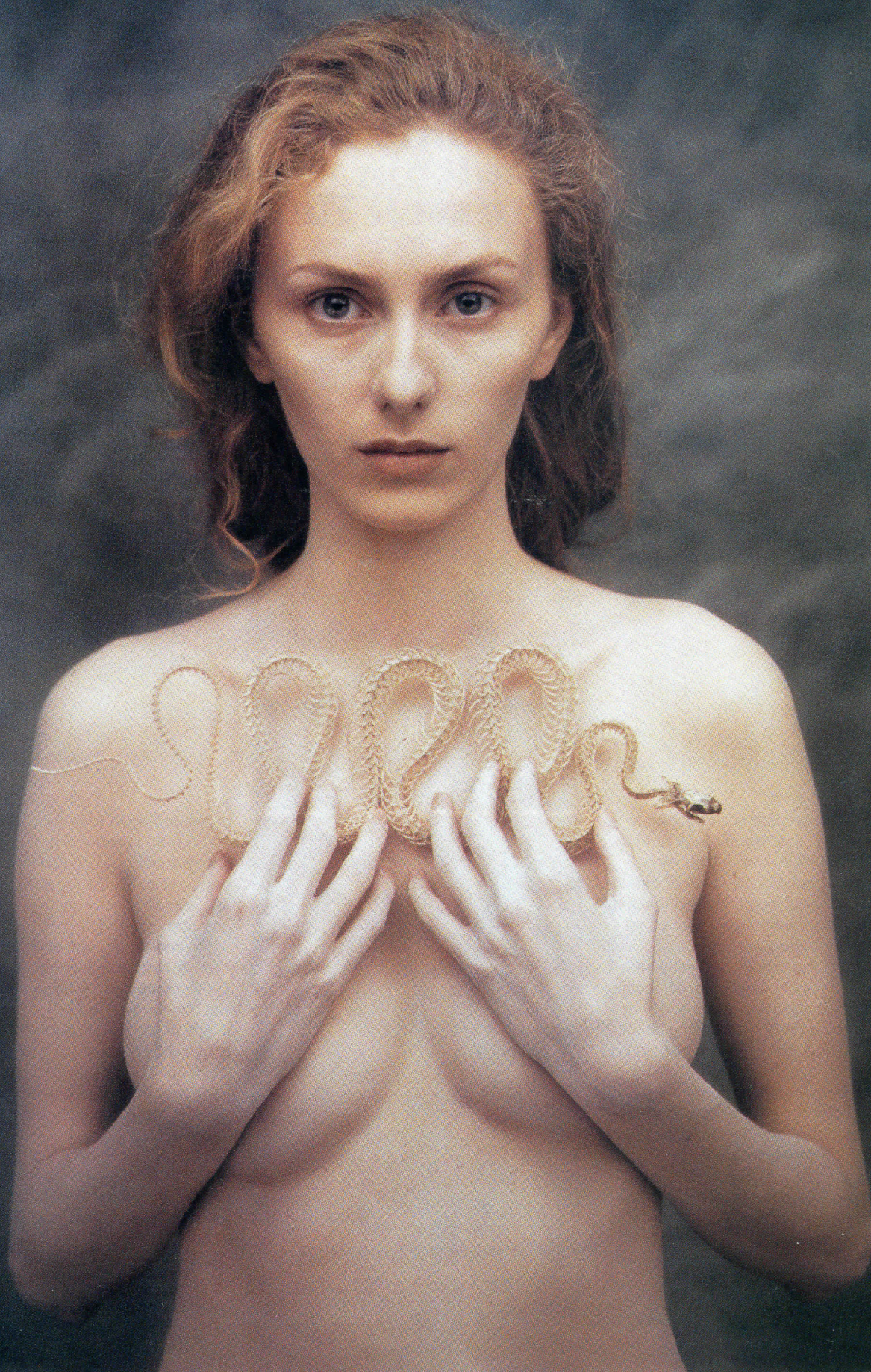
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in, according to Tenneson. "But the best ones come because they're simply trying to figure out how to move on to the next step artistically. They know I view teaching as a way to foster growth—both spiritual and photographic."

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 more than a decade, to New York City, where she made the transition to color and began to do commercial assignments. Her style survived both changes, and she began to garner such prizes as the International Center of Photography's Infinity Award. Indeed, the renewed enthusiasm of the past few years for spirituality and religion has reinforced the already strong interest in her work among book buyers, gallery-goers, and collectors. *Time* magazine,

This page: "Kristin,"
from the cover of
Tennessee's new
book, *Illuminations*.
Opposite: "Suzanne
and Mirror," also
from the book.





Opposite: "Suzanne with Snake," a variation of an image in *Transformations*. Right: "Spiritual Warrior and Wing," from *Illuminations*.

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 that subject. "I had the...idea that I could bring my interest in the world of the spirit to a larger...potential audience," Tenneson writes in *Illuminations*, her fifth book, published by Bulfinch Press. (To win a copy, see page 9.)

Tenneson considers books to be the most important vehicles for her work—even more important than exhibitions. "If I had to choose, I'd do books rather than shows," she says. "But it's not just that books are professionally valuable. Books put a kind of closure on a period of your artistic life. They free you up, psychologically, to move on to different things." Coming roughly at five-year intervals—a rare frequency for a serious fine-art photographer—Tenneson's books have been an important catalyst for her artistic growth. (The last was *Transformations*, published by Bulfinch in 1993.) "As I look back at all five books, I realize I might not have gone on to do the work that followed without the distance each one gave me," says Tenneson. The photographer says that books are much more labor intensive than shows—*Illuminations* was nearly two years in the making—but more enduring. "They're a living record of your artistic journey," she says.

Though *Illuminations* includes multi-panel images of architecture and sculptural



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details—a new direction for the photographer—it concentrates on the human figure, like Tenneson's previous work. "I've always been fascinated by bodies, of all types and ages," she says. "I love the way skin metamorphoses over time, from infancy to old age. Every person is different,

every age is different, and the human body seems to mirror what you put next to it—stone, fabric, foliage."

But as you'd expect, Tenneson views the body's exterior mainly as a manifestation of something internal. How does she get her subjects to reveal themselves so fully? "People often ask me at my lectures if my subjects are embarrassed about posing for me, and the answer is no," she says. "I think the people I choose to photograph know that I find them interesting in both a physical and spiritual way, and that overcomes their hesitation."

In fact, Tenneson is the nervous one. "I rarely sleep the night before a big shoot," she says. "I'm thinking too hard about who I'm going to be photographing, and anxious about doing something with depth—something that pushes me."

Tenneson considers books to be the most important vehicles for her work.





Opposite: actress
Jodie Foster,
a portrait for
Premiere magazine.
This page:
"Two Women."



Left: "Twins, Eyes Opened and Closed." Below: Joyce Tenneson.

craftmatters

Though Joyce Tenneson's unique 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 avows. "Basically, I don't shoot until things look the way I want them to in front of the camera." The seemingly internal light in Tenneson's subjects, for example, comes from 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 (and sometimes reduced) exposure of the background by itself. Tenneson used to daub her subjects in white limestone powder to enhance that pallor, but rarely uses makeup anymore.

Tenneson's technique varies with format—she uses 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 is 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. But my books are all a mixed bag of formats, and you can't tell one from another in the pictures." —R.H.



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Once she's shooting, however, Tenneson works quickly. "My pictures look very meditative, but I'm not at all meditative on the set," she says. "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." When she was photographing Kristin, the woman who ended up on the cover of *Illuminations*, Tenneson told her subject that she reminded her of an exotic bird, and this led to a series of pictures of the woman "flying."

Flight and wings have been a recurring theme in Tenneson's work since the beginning, one part of its mythological freight. Yet it's clear, on close inspection, that the

"myths" she depicts are entirely personal. And their very indecipherability may explain the success of Tenneson's work. "The mystery of Joyce's images is what makes them so universally appealing," says Janet Bush, Tenneson's longtime editor at Bulfinch Press. "People can project their own feelings and fantasies on them." ■

"The body seems to mirror what you put next to it," says Tenneson.