





Distant Horizon, 1980.

Elizabeth Opalenik: A Photographer's Journal

by Elizabeth Opalenik

Author's note: I am a big believer in the workshop way of learning, owing my beginnings to the Maine Photographic Workshops (MPW) 27 years ago. I think it is important for students to know how that creative process helps to form the career of an artist, including the good, the bad, and the connections made along the way. This journal of stepping stone images was originally created as a slide show and original portfolio in 1999 to honor the 25-year anniversary of The Workshops and my 20-year relationship of growing with them. The journey of a photographic artist is sometimes lonely and sometimes difficult, but strewn with love and support—essential and often invisible. That and finding my passion in life is what sustains me. I realize that while I work in many genres, behind each of them is a body of work, for the creative path is always rewarding and a gift.

1979

You are going on a spaceship and all that you can take with you are four images. What would you take and why? And so began my journey through the photographic process with Craig Stevens as my

opposite: *Love Dress, 1979*

guide. The Cartier-Bresson “Images of Man” slide show, Craig’s personal work, and this assignment put me over the edge as I tearfully explored the next 24 hours, realizing what a powerful metaphor photography could be. For my journey into the unknown, I took knowledge in the form of a teacher that was a library of all things photographic and still could discuss in the same sentence



Jayne Potting, 1982.

Cartier-Bresson, reblochon cheese and Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape wines: my childhood and all the life tools it had given me; love with the fond memories of so many good friends; and freedom of choice as I was embracing a new life. I could expose, develop and print an image when I entered this two week intermediate workshop, so, modestly I thought, on a scale of one to ten, I must be at least a five. I learned I wasn't even a minus ten as I committed to the Maine Photographic Workshops three-month resident program, but remained for a year and a half. No looking back, no regrets.

1980

I started 1980 on a resident program work scholarship submitted by Reid Callanan in my behalf. The workshops were young and since I'd had my own construction/design company it was a good match. My best friend Billy funded more time off "because you have talent," he said. Becoming Facilities Director for the summer program and the knowledge that fitting in photog-

raphy was already becoming a luxury followed it. A scuba diver, fascinated with the light underwater and determined to capture its magic, I trusted fate when I put my camera in a plastic bag and headed to the ponds and pools of Maine. From the beginning, images involving water would be my chosen genre. That I chose figure work is a credit to Kate Carter whose critique of my first attempt in 1979 was "get that stuff off the board, I can't even bear to look at it." Truly, she had more confidence in my ability than I and I suspect that pushed me a little harder.

1981-1984

The next few summers are spent around the workshops and their incredible energy. Because I have arrived at photography with many careers behind me, I make connections on many levels. Where else could I jump on mattresses with Ernst Haas as I helped decorate his Rockport home, trade Paul Caponigro a home cooked meal while he played the piano, or become lifelong friends

with Lilo Raymond who has shared her generosity of spirit throughout my career.

Living in Westport CT, I am still a “Ms Placed Lady” with my construction/design company, managing jazz clubs and catering events. But all spare moments are spent doing portraits of other artists, working with United Cerebral Palsy and their “Games for the Disabled” or working in the darkroom.

Photography is a passion, still not a profession as I leave in 1983 to explore Europe on my own. MPW is establishing its program in France with Craig and Kate and I find myself in the right place, offering to help Craig build the darkroom. It is the beginning of 23 years of workshops abroad and undoubtedly, it is the strongest influence on my work as a passionate relationship with France and a new mentor, Jean Pierre Sudre, and his Mordançage process is formed. Fortunately, I am invited back to France in 1984 as Craig’s assistant with Eliot Porter as our artist in residence. Being in the presence of this gentle spirit is enough. Sharing photographic and life lessons over a late night brandy even better. Because of the incredible midday light, I fully embrace infrared film.

In 1984, Lucien Clergue introduces me to the “corrida” in Arles and I begin the “Dance with the Matador” series, another form of self-portrait. I continue with this hand-painted project to this day, only recently organizing the work for exhibitions.

Working on MPW housing with Kate, I trade my renovation skills for classes with Michael O’Neill, Greg Heisler and Barbara Bordnick. There is a possibility to become an assistant to Michael, but at 37, I want my own career. Kate died tragically in the fall of 1984 and we are stunned. The photographic community has lost an incredible teacher.

1985

I return to MPW in the spring of 1985 to help David Lyman organize more housing for summer programs and to help pack Kate’s things. My contact sheets still look as though 36 people had held the camera. Though I have made many images in the past that resembled Kate’s work, they have remained in boxes as I found my own photographic voice. “Kate’s Pitcher” (page 22) is symbolic in many ways as I return to France with



Bullfight, 1984.

Craig, trying to fill the void Kate has left. It becomes the catalyst for a series of high-key images that are polytoned and hand painted. Getting directed, working only on hand-painted images, results in a beautiful exhibition in France two years later.

While doing senior class portraits, “Betty Ann” learned hand painting in high school and now uses it to find humor in her self portraits.

1986

A head-on car crash in the spring of 1986 has left me rather stupid and in denial. I return to MPW as summer Director of Operations. A scary thought as some days I can’t remember my name, but I need a safe haven and can function in this environment. I also know that my construction and design days are over. “Prepasted” (page 23) is my going-out-of-business card.

1987

All processes come slowly to me this year with more body damage and head injury than I am willing to reveal to anyone including myself. New images are few as I forget to put film in my camera and beg Reid not to tell anyone I can’t remember how to process it when I do. Yet I wonder why no one understands when I screw up and am constantly lost. I cry a lot, photograph hesitantly and begin using a student’s borrowed Widelix camera. One later becomes a gift from Ginette Vachon, another lifelong friend made at the workshops.

I am about to move to Europe when I land a job hand painting an ad campaign for American



Kate's Pitcher, 1985.

Express. Though I still show the same portfolio to art directors, doors open when I comment, "Well, I just finished a campaign for American Express..." I now have credibility and only want to focus on photography.

Even with a New York and Connecticut rep my style and nudes are not for the American market and I have little work. Mostly I am sought to paint other campaigns and do commissioned portraits.

1989

The high-key work is always well received and I sell prints to most art directors I see. I show only hand-painted originals mounted on beautiful watercolor papers, as I cannot bear to see the work on 4x5 transparencies. However, in 1989, this isn't the norm and technology still isn't there for reproduction. All I want is to "hide the portfolio until the right campaign and budget come along." As I watch the Berlin wall fall, I know I have just lost the *LIFE* magazine cover I was offered by

Peter Howe, another workshop connection. I also know I still did not have the faculty to do it right. Working at 50%, with \$50,000 of medical bills and mindless decisions these past three years, I am becoming discouraged when a London rep discovers me and finds a big budget. Thank god I have her, as I know the farm girl in me could never quote these day rates.

1990

Working at this level is truly a joy and for once in my life, a real budget for props. "*Chaise Lingerie*" becomes a billboard throughout London, but they only manage one of the three ads. Ten years in the process has brought me to this level of creativity and for the first time production crews. We fill an abandoned swimming pool with five tons of rock and I pray from scaffolding that I can do it. I also pray for it to warm up and stop lightning before five o'clock. This ad is to run in every major woman's magazine in Europe and I am euphoric. Then the perfume bottles explode and the campaign is pulled. I, however, have more credibility and a beautiful image. I also become more connected to France, teaching a workshop at the Rencontres d'Arles, with Lucien Clergue. Reid has now started The Santa Fe Workshops and though my class does not fill, I come to support my friend in his dream. I meet some incredible locals as I too, again, fall in love with Santa Fe.

1991

This is a big year.

After years of visiting Sudre's atelier each summer and admiring his work, in 1991 he offers to teach a workshop in Mordançage for Craig and a few Americans at MPW. I am first on the list and spend endless hours testing his process and patience as he caringly says, "No, no, no, Elisabeth. You remove the silver gelatin. I thought you would be the easiest student!" Known as the "drape queen" in most of my genres, I am determined to capture it here by adding my signature to this work and creating something new in the process. It is a challenge and I need to find patience, but I am hooked. In my heart and soul, I know that I have photographically come home. By the end of the week he is asking for my notes and a new mutual respect is formed. To Craig I will be forever



Prepasted, 1986.

grateful for opening this door.

I am also ready to make the permanent move to Europe and so give up my Connecticut house, which has enabled me to have the many free summers to be in France and Rockport. I am in Maine to teach “The Romantic Photograph” when I meet my husband, Enrique Martinez...a supportive, loving soul and a student in my class. Fate has kept us both there an extra week and I too now become a workshop statistic. As I ponder how many couples workshops have created, I move back into my winter rental and become a frequent flyer to Texas, carrying my negatives with me. In 1992, between workshops, we are married.

The teaching and travel schedule are hectic, leaving little time to even process personal film hastily made during workshops. My levels of students are higher and repeating, requiring me to test and learn new processes, but leaving little time to actually put together a body of finished work. I desperately search for time to work in Mordançage as I experience the three highest stress factors: getting married, changing jobs, and moving across country. Hello, California.

1993

After two floods and four darkrooms in six months, it is time to buy a house and get settled. Holding a sauté pan while wearing a hardhat,

darkroom apron, and negligee I try to be all things. My mantra becomes, “yes I can, yes I can, yes I can.” But with each new art director set back, my spirits are low and I switch to showing my work to San Francisco galleries. After one particularly bad experience in late 1993, I know I can’t start this process again. Getting known on another coast, especially in the land of Weston and Adams, by dropping off slide pages for six months doesn’t work for me. I put all portfolios away and do not show them in the city for two years. France energy is “off” this summer and with male testosterone high, the Toscana workshops I helped to establish slip away. I become attached to Tuscany however, and with “where Gianni dreams” my hand painting style changes. I spend any extra time working on formulas to create the perfect drape in Mordançage.

1994

In 1994, the garage becomes the permanent darkroom, but Mordançage keepers are still few. California is still in recession and I am still with debt struggling with what is next. While working on the house I ponder my reflection in a tar bucket. While working in the darkroom I ponder an image turning black in the developer from an “oh shit!” lens left wide open after focusing. Creativity comes from many places. It is our job as artists to



Who Threw the Dog?, 1988.

About Light, 1989.



*page 25, top: Distant Horizon, 1990;
below: Margot, 1993 (Mordançage).*

recognize them. The work turns dark and heavily selenium toned. Truly all photographs are self-portraits.

1995

I start 1995 ready to sell my cameras and get a “real” job, when a proposal to the LPGA for a black-and-white and hand-painted campaign becomes a huge success and they commit for five years. The work is a good mental break and they embrace my ideas. The volume of campaign stock they need is enormous, but the financial security allows me to return to my art for the pure pleasure of creating. The highlight of the summer is showing Sudre the new Mordançage piece “*Wind-swept,*” and hearing his “bravo, Elisabeth, bravo,” as he inspects the draped veils of silver emulsion and smiles at this extended creation to his formulas.

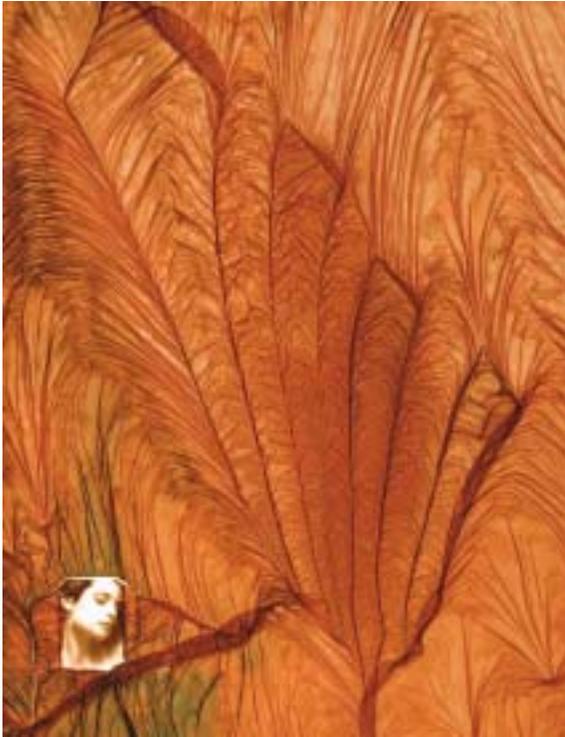
1996

All cameras are stolen in Rome after the 1996 Tuscany workshop and it is a mad scramble to replace everything before returning to France for an assignment on barging the canals. It is a dream job with nightmare hours as I crisscross the country for two weeks photographing the seven barges, wine, food, people and interiors. I learn a lot quickly as I try to figure out my new systems and to master flash photography. Still working in infrared, I bring a workshop to Cumberland Island, have some private time with models and know I am in love with the Mamiya 7, my answer to the Leica and 4x5 I always wanted. I have now added multiple formats to my multiple personalities.

1997

As I bring my own workshop to France and visit Sudre, I am struck by how ill he has become and know that this will be the last time I will see him alive. Returning with students to the gate that day, a bird hits the glass door and dies at my feet. I spend the next few days crying and making dead bird images with manipulated SX-70s. The Polaroid has become my new form of therapy. In the next two months, until he dies, I find five more. I am deeply saddened, more committed to Mordançage and know again the world of photography has lost an incredible and gifted human being. It is time to explore new things, so I rent a studio space to





teach myself lighting and do my first ad campaign in Mordançage for Michael Good Design. On the other side of the circle, I acquire the Nancy Lopez Golf campaign and barge the rivers of Holland and Germany on another assignment.

1998

Manipulated Polaroids become the main means of getting any work done as I deal with the loss of mentors and learn the hard way that David's theory of 250 dinners with your spouse is not enough. Billy funds the expensive digital scans of many to be reproduced large for his inns and restaurants. A job in Africa and the Seychelles in 1998 sparks my interest again in photojournalism as I contemplate taking a break from teaching to allow more time for home and personal work, but know that I get more than I give. I live to be creative, but know it comes at a price.

1999

The spring of 1999 I do one final travel assignment to the Persian Gulf, the new "hot" vacation location. These years of trading images for travel have provided photo stock but I know my schedule must change. The Persian Gulf also turns out to be too "hot," the company folds and I lose \$30,000 of accrued travel credits I never found time to use. My teaching at Santa Fe has opened beautiful doors at Los Luceros and introduced me to some lovely models and a stepping stone image in my career.

2000

2000 begins with an exhibition in NYC. Three weeks of 15-hour days, brings me this image for the invitation. The show is well attended by students from around the country, coming to gather and renew workshop friendships. I feel incredibly supported and blessed. I teach non-stop through September doing little personal work, but the day I finish I am called back to the family farm.

I left home in 1969 to the sound of peace marches and my mother saying, "I knew you were different from the time you were two." Now I must face losing this pillar in my life as I spend the last six weeks of hers facing cancer. With her loss, I fear really recapturing my childhood memories,



Jo Jo, Looking Toward the Light, 1996.



above, left: *Embrace Yourself, 1997* (Mordançage);
above, right: *Los Luceros, 1999* (Infra-red).

“What takes time to
create, time respects.”

Elizabeth Opalenik, 2006

page 26, top: *Flight of Dreams, 1993* (Mordançage);
below: *The Embrace, 1994*).



community near my childhood home. I find solace there in the afternoons, taking a break from the long days at the hospital. They become my metaphor for memories left behind.

2001

The spring of 2001 finds me in the bayous of Louisiana still working in infrared and still loving the water. Polaroids are still my therapy, especially in the workshops I am conducting abroad in Provence, Burgundy, and Tuscany where they open doors to locals with their magical power of manipulation.

Mordançage is still my passion but like everything, this year must ultimately be about 9/11 and the effect it has had on us all. I arrived in Tuscany from JFK in time to see the towers fall but with all flights cancelled, students cannot make it to the Venice workshop I have organized. European compassion surrounds me as I sit in restaurants with tears streaming down my face. I have wished for alone time to do my own work but images

elude me while I wait to return home. I can only stare at the two cypress trees and reflect on the loss of freedom that I know will pervade every decision I now make on workshops abroad.

2002

I do a Venice replacement workshop in 2002, but don't actually print or look at the images for two years. Barging workshops in Burgundy are a perfect venue for the Polaroid manipulations along with bookmaking in the alternative process workshops I teach. In a *Forbes* magazine article, I am fondly named "the Martha Stewart of photography" by one of my students. It's a "good thing."

2003

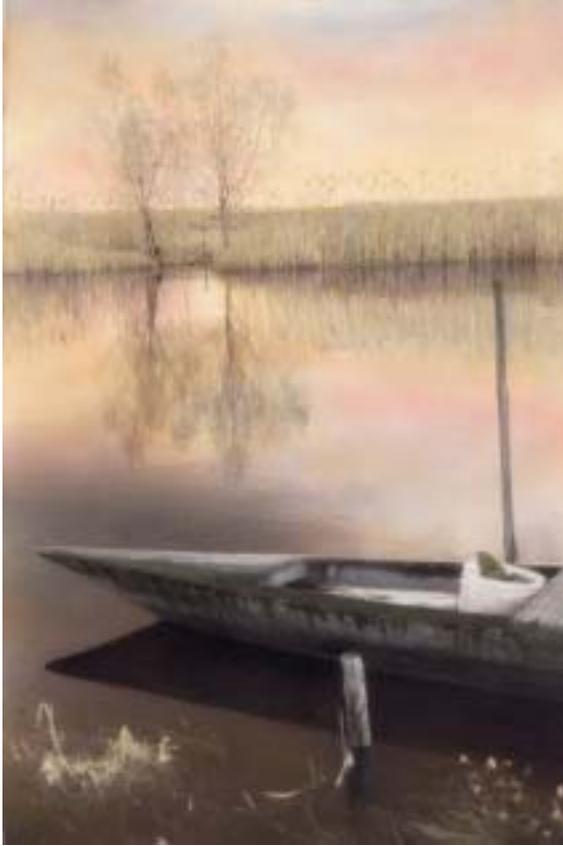
In 2003 I finally own a Leica and it serves me well. I have found a new love in the baths of San Miguel del Allende and enjoy the possibilities of going back to teach. It is the one place I actually see in color.

Water is still my passion. Bored with hearing

opposite: *Changer la femme*, 2000 (Mordançage).

below: *Three Girls*, 2000.





myself moan about not having a black bottom pool, I buy a black cement-mixing tub, fill it with water, set it in my yard and work with the flowers from my garden. In reality, it is still about the light, reflection, shapes and form. It is about learning to see, to see what else there is.

2004

In 2004 new workshops are formed with a former student, Dr. Matthew Budd and the F. Holland Day Center for Creativity and Healing. By using photography, along with Matt's coaching, creative windows are opened for women with breast cancer to access dialogue. It has been my dream since 1979 to continue exploring the power of photography and creativity for unlocking doors and I am grateful for Matt's medical expertise in this partnership. It is the start of having to teach digitally though, and the learning curve that week makes me crazy. I now own a Canon 30D converted at the factory for infrared and am honored when the women allow "naked" portraits of themselves. We are all works of art and access to this inner beauty results in a calendar funded by Freestyle Photographic Supplies for workshop scholarships. My manipulated Polaroids in the Napa Style catalogue have also bought me the time to devote to the project.

Through The Santa Fe Workshops I begin producing and teaching for National Geographic Expeditions in Tuscany. Because I went from student to teacher early in my career, it allows me to co-teach with other professional photographers filling in my educational gaps I feel lacking. I am not like the Geographic instructors, but if I stick to my theory that all photographs are self portraits, I can inject my way of artistic thinking, and finally realize it is appreciated for just that.

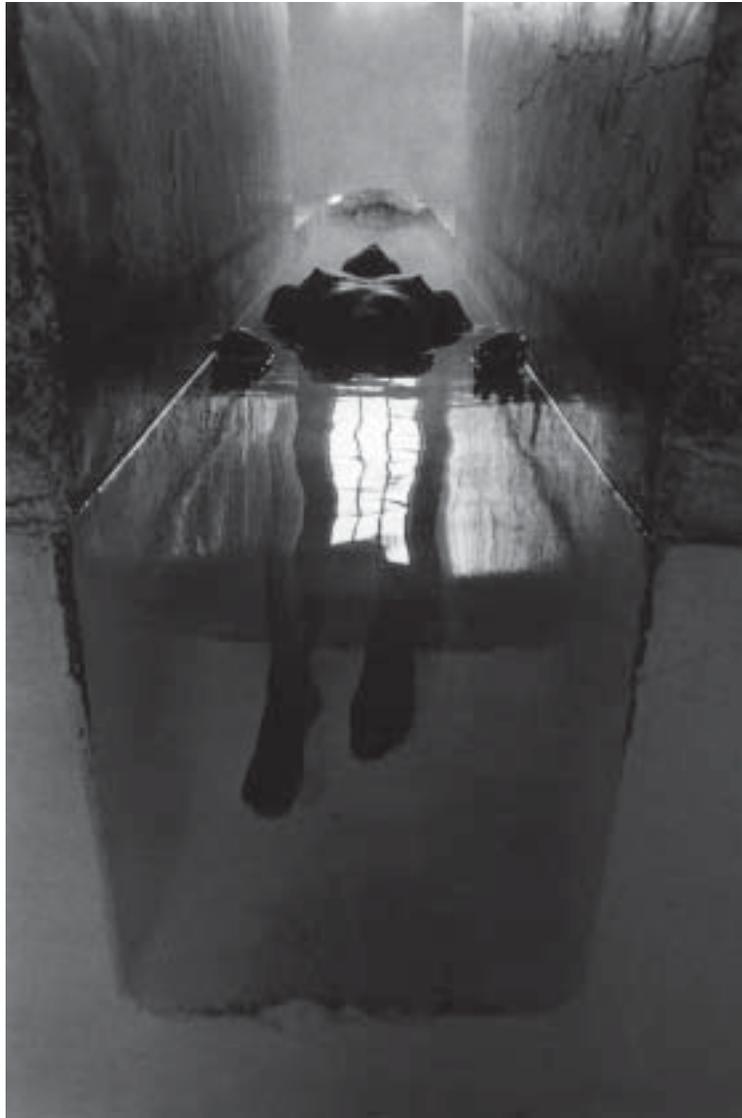
2005

I begin 2005 doing commissioned portraits, finally getting to use the broken shower door I have been saving for 10 years. Still loving film and frustrated with the changes in photography, I return to hand painting and embrace the beautiful



top: Veneto, 2002;

below: Touch the Earth, 2004.



Outer Light, Inner Peace, 2003.

new Durst L1200 enlarger my husband, Marty, has presented me. However, I do a dance project digitally in Siena, to be projected during their performance three days later. I am there between the Geographic classes, which have tripled, and now I am forced to really learn digital to be effective as a teacher. It offers wonderful possibilities, but my heart is still in the darkroom as I watch the transition in my students. We no longer talk about why we made the image, or how it makes us feel, but only pixels, Photoshop, memory, ram, and the latest updates. For me, being out of

memory takes on a new meaning. I am renewed by the strength, honesty, and beauty that the women in the healing workshops continue to bring forth through photography. Auditing Joyce Tenneson's book publishing class, I spend the week putting together yet another book dummy, but suddenly question if I really have enough work in one genre to make it work. Back to the shelf. Maybe I do need to get directed again.

2006

I begin this year committing to a weekly shoot





above: *Valentina Dancers*, 2006.

opposite: *Shower Embrace*, 2005.

or commissioned portraits but feel I am repeating myself. My heart is still in love with Mordançage and I return to the darkroom to work in the process. Successes are few as my standards are high and favorite darkroom papers have disappeared or lack a good silver emulsion. I have always been allergic to the darkroom, so hours with the chemicals and my schedule are limiting. I have an epiphany while trying to create Mordançage images and realize why I have worked with SX 70 Polaroids or directly played on a scanner. It is about instant gratification and calming some of the frustration of balancing time as an artist being an educator to support that creativity. I am a good teacher, but know that it is beginning to come at a price personally and creatively. I know I must finish this year of scheduled workshops, finish one of the books to help understand the work and get back to the reason I became a photographic artist.

I now face losing my friend Billy to pancreatic cancer, and understand death is an abstract concept until it knocks on your door. There since the beginning supporting my career, with the circle closing, I question everything. I write Matt, my

partner in the healing classes, “I no longer know who I am”. He responds “Good.” Maybe it is so as I start a new direction, walking my dog Nikonos on the beach photographing the tidal remains. I realize they teach me everything I need to remember... CA

When I first decided to do an article on Elizabeth Opalenik, it was to be included within the article on Santa Fe Workshops in the previous issue of *CameraArts* (September/October 2006). As a very active participant of her “Imagination and Dreams” workshop, however, I was quickly brought under the spell of her teaching and direction. One night during the workshop, she gave a talk on her work and her photographic life. That was the genesis for this article. After her talk, I walked up to her, amid the din of the appreciation of those in attendance, and suggested that we do the article just as she had presented it that night. After seeing what she put together, I am convinced it was the best way to present the material.

-tba

Elizabeth's work is represented on her website at www.opalenik.com, and through John Stevenson Gallery in NY, Verve Fine Arts in Santa Fe and Gallery Deforest in Ashland OR. To find out more about her forthcoming book, please contact elizabeth@opalenik.com.