

ELIZABETH

OPALENIK

Employing a wide array of processes, techniques and print media, Elizabeth Opalenik's photography is reflective of the notion of art as an exploration and expression of creative discovery and self-revelation.

"For me photography can be a metaphor for everything in life and looking at the world, not just in terms of what the image is about,

but in bringing my life and viewpoint to it," says Opalenik. "Give me a box with a hole in it and I'll make an image."

Among the many processes Opalenik has worked with over the past three decades are etched/manipulated SX-70 Polaroids, hand-painted silver gelatin prints, digital color imaging, and Mordançage, a fabulously ethereal and involved darkroom process whereby the print emulsion is chemically lifted off the photographic paper and then, in Opalenik's signature enhancement of the process, re-floated back onto the paper surface.

"While everything appeals to me, I consider the Polaroid and digital more like therapy than my real work," Opalenik comments. "'Digital is a wonderful medium to play and experiment with. Because both are more instant, the way I use them is to go around and document things as I would in a journal to record what is happening in the world. Regardless of the genre, all of my work is about finding beauty, elegance and sensuality in life.'"

Although Opalenik's passion for sensuality, movement and elegance is expressed throughout her oeuvre- from her series on bullfighting and dancers, to her lovely figurative studies- it is through her use of Mordançage that the artist taps into her deepest creative instincts.

Opalenik took her first workshop in Mordançage in 1991, studying with the creator of the process, French photographer Jean-Pierre Sudre, whom she had befriended almost a decade before.

In Mordançage, a silver gelatin print is immersed in a solution of glacial acetic acid, hydrogen peroxide and copper chloride. At this stage part of the emulsion from the densest areas of the print begins to bleach out and is chemically lifted off the surface of the



paper and rinsed away. The print is then redeveloped in weakened solutions of film and paper developers or sulfurized toners.

According to Opalenik, it is through the use of different developers and toners, and the chemical oxidation of the silver, that imparts the subtle color and tonalities to the Mordançage print. Opalenik added her own unique spin to the process by letting the floating emulsion fold back on itself like a kind of transparent skin and allowing it to re-settle back onto the paper in new and unexpected configurations.

"I'm fascinated by the color I get in Mordançage," says Opalenik. "It is an exquisite and very unique process that I studied at a time when I was looking for a way to expand my own work.

"I was delighted when I learned the process and wanted to make it my own which is where the 'draping' came in. I think the fascination and appeal with Mordançage also had as much to do with Sudre himself as it did the process. He was a phenomenal human being who had figured it all out about his life and work."

Currently based in Oakland, California, Opalenik first became interested in photography and alternative processes while attending a Maine Photographic Workshop in 1979. While there she became particularly enamored with infrared film and hand painting.

The artist describes her interest and use of alternative processes as driven by a need for hands-on engagement with photographic materials as well as a strong preference for one-of-a-kind interpretations.

"These processes not only became my voice but a personal quest," says Opalenik, "and I think that all of my work, even as it changes and evolves, represents a form of self-portraiture. Although I work in different genres with all kinds of cameras, I still feel a signature style runs through all of my work."

Opalenik went on to first pursue a career in editorial and commercial photography using her unique style for such clients as American Express, Gossard Lingerie, Coty Perfume, Michael Good Design, Sea Air Holidays and ongoing campaigns for The Ladies Professional Golf Association and Nancy Lopez Golf.

"I was fortunate that in my commercial work I was asked to do what I did often in my fine art work, mostly hand painted ads," she recalls.

Over the past two decades, Opalenik has emerged as a much sought-after and respected teacher and lecturer, having led workshops privately and for the Sante Fe Photographic Workshops, the Maine Media Workshops, The Rencontres d'Arles, and National Geographic Expeditions among others "I teach with the theory that all good photographs are self-portraits that lie somewhere between imaginations and dreams," she says

The artist's numerous portfolios have been featured in such publications as Zoom, Camera Arts, Black and White Magazine,













