



# THE PICTURE PROFESSIONAL

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**PORTFOLIO: Elizabeth Opalenik**

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© Frances M. Roberts



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#### ABOUT THE COVER

Elizabeth Opalenik thinks all of her work is essentially about poetic grace moving through an image. To read more about Elizabeth, see "Portfolio: Coming Home to the Heart."

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# PORTFOLIO

Much of Elizabeth Opalenik's imagery is lyrical. It has an ethereal beauty and a painterly quality. Her work is similar to the Pictorialists (a movement and aesthetic, 1845-1945, which regarded photography as fine art). While Elizabeth has much in common with the Pictorialists, she says she doesn't think of herself that way. Coincidentally, though, she conducts workshops in the chalet at Little Good Harbor, Maine, which was a retreat of F. Holland Day in the early 1900s. "No matter which images are made there, they all seem to be channeling 'Fred,'" says Elizabeth. Day was an influential and controversial Pictorialist known especially for his photographs of nude men and a series of images of the crucifixion of Christ, for which he also posed.

Elizabeth has worked as an accounting manager, interior designer, restaurateur, contractor and, as a child, she lived on a farm. In addition to her out-of-focus images, she has an interest in photojournalism. She has covered dancers, bullfighting, the female form and the Amish. A favorite photographic process for her is Mordançage. All of these paths, this variety, fuel her creativity.

"The paths all converge, sometimes collide, and always keep me interested," says Elizabeth. "I make images because I must. And my preference is still to make the image in camera. Crop is a four-letter word."

## *I MAKE IMAGES BECAUSE I MUST*

Barbara Goodbody, who is a former student of Elizabeth's and on the Maine Media Workshops advisory board, bought the first limited edition platinum portfolio of the Amish from Elizabeth. She finds the photographer to be a brilliant artist and beloved, nurturing instructor whose love of experimentation is inspiring. Barbara says, "When I first saw her early images in her Amish work—images she made in the countryside where she grew up—I was moved to tears. They are beautifully crafted, and her platinum prints are exquisite. Often I hear one's best work reflects one's own soul. In this body of work, Elizabeth has combined her creative, finely honed talents in the craft with her love and sense of place. Dare I say a coming home to the heart."

According to Craig Stevens, professor of photography at the Savannah College of Art and Design, "...mastery of materials does not guarantee that art will happen. What is necessary is a moment in the process or maybe a series of moments in the process when the spirit of the image maker somehow invades the work being made. It is the magic that separates the expected with the unexpected."

Stevens recalled one such instance when Elizabeth was participating in a Mordançage workshop with the master Jean Pierre Sudre in his studio in Lacoste, France. Stevens describes the Mordançage process as bleaching a silver gelatin print in a mixture of very strong acidic and basic solutions that swell the blacks of the print so much that



after redevelopment, veils of black gelatin hang like spider webs on the image. In Sudre's process, these veils would then be wiped away and the print washed and dried. Stevens continues, "Elizabeth looked at the veils and thought they were lovely and delicate and began to choreograph how they would lay on the paper, manipulating them by hand or with drops of water. The results were unexpected and enchanting. When Sudre looked at what Elizabeth had









done, he smiled, shook his head and said out loud ‘*Les Americains!*’ Elizabeth had taken a series of steps with a predictable outcome and injected her own intuitive sense of beauty into it. It is what she does.”

#### WHAT TAKES TIME TO CREATE, TIME RESPECTS

Rather than simply documenting dancing and bullfighting, Elizabeth’s images show motion much like some painters do. Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) and Carol Carra’s *The Red Horseman*, (1913) for example, show parts of the body in stages of movement. The difference in Elizabeth’s work is the grace she shows and possibly in the emotion that elicits in the viewer. She says: “I think all of my work is essentially about that poetic grace moving through an image.”

Elizabeth believes that all good photographs are self portraits that lie somewhere between imagination and dreams. She wanted to be a dancer growing up and that dream has always stayed with her. She was raised on a farm outside of Pittsburgh and learned about the Amish who lived nearby. She finds the same grace and fluidity in a bullfight and in the female form that she finds in dancers and in the wet sand of a beach.

#### ALL GOOD PHOTOGRAPHS ARE SELF PORTRAITS

“In my 30 years circulating through the photographic community, I have met few individuals who have developed their creative inspiration as richly as Elizabeth,” says Reid Callanan of the Santa Fe Photographic Workshops. “The images that flow from her frequent bursts of inspiration always surprise and delight me. She has the wonderful ability to turn any photographic process into her own unique vision and voice, from infrared to handcoloring to Mordançage. There are more unrestrained, creative impulses in her fingers and heart than seems fair for one person.”

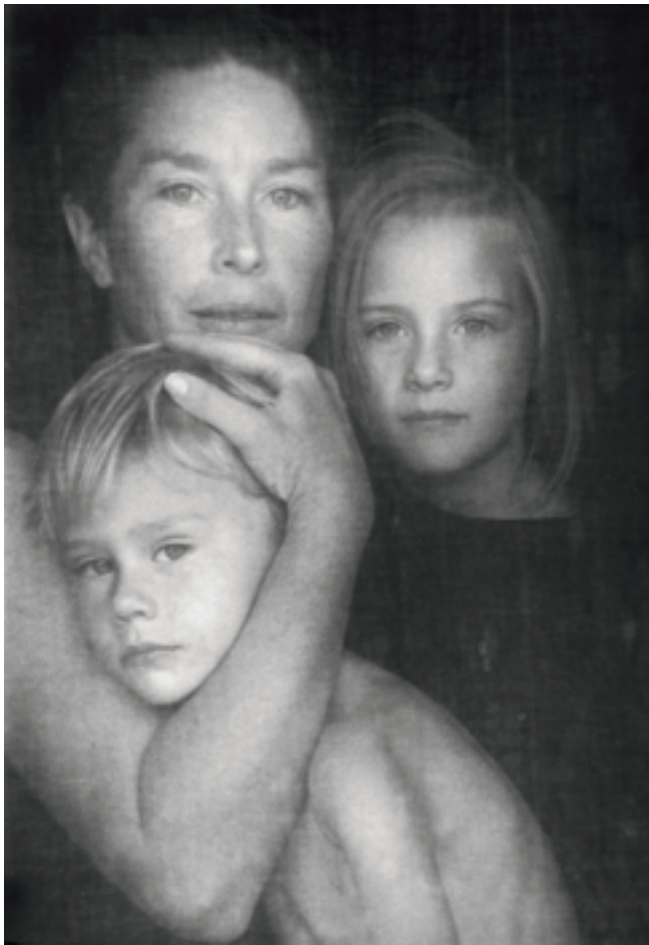
Elizabeth says that, for her, photography “is the visual voice for stories left behind. My photographs are not going to change the world, but hopefully they are a peaceful place to rest the mind or a metaphor to opening hearts to see subjects differently.”

—Niki Barrie, editor-in-chief, *The Picture Professional*

Elizabeth Opalenik resides in Oakland, California. You can find a listing of her workshops and information on private sessions on her website, [www.elizabethopalenik.com](http://www.elizabethopalenik.com). Her book, *Poetic Grace*, is available through [www.poeticgrace.com](http://www.poeticgrace.com). All images on Elizabeth’s websites are for sale. Her galleries include Gallery 291 in San Francisco; Verve Gallery of Photography in Santa Fe and Gallery DeForest in Ashland, Oregon. Contact Elizabeth directly for stock images at [Elizabeth@opalenik.com](mailto:Elizabeth@opalenik.com). ●







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