



Decisive Moments

Winners of A&A's 6th annual photography contest capture the daisy chain of instances that creates an experience.

By Patti Verbanas

Inside movement there is one moment in which the elements are in balance," Henri Cartier-Bresson said.

"Photography must seize the importance of this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it." This year's winners' circle is dominated by movement. Or rather, the capturing of a time-elapsing experience in one cohesive work. A lonely, but heroic statue losing its battle to the ravages of time; fog shrouding a lake; spooky-reverent revelers honoring their deceased; religious ecstasy—and apathy—in a Savannah church; and visual love letters from a woman to her female relatives. With the exception of the landscape, the other five winners depict a compilation of moments captured through long exposures. In fact, half of the winning photos were taken with pinhole cameras.

"Most photographs capture a second in time," explains Rachel Woodburn, who nearly swept the amateur category with

her "Water Women" series of pinhole camera images. "But the longer exposures capture something we never see in reality: multiple moments in time. They capture the body movements and expressions we don't get in a still frame, which starts to tell us more about the essence of the subject."

With about 100 entries to review, the 2006 judges had their work cut out for them. Composition played a role, as did technical skill and originality, but the deciding factor was serendipity. (For more on the winners, see Resources on page 94.) Discussion around the A&A conference table was animated as would be expected at such an assembly of sharp-eyed veterans. This year's contest saw the return of Jane Jackson, a judge from A&A's first photography contest in 2001. Jackson is the

director of the Sir Elton John Photography Collection, the largest and most significant privately held fine-art photography collection in the world. Joining Jackson was Julian Cox, curator of photography at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Author of three books on photography, Cox spent 12 years at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and before then was at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, England. And rounding out the panel was Tom Fischer, a professor of photography and past dean of the school of media arts at the Savannah College of Art and Design whose photographs have been shown in more than 60 exhibitions throughout the world. Though their backgrounds vary, each judge was on the alert for those images that prompted a double take—or took their breaths away.

Now we invite you to turn the page and join the discussion. Which image resonates most with you? We'd like to know. E-mail us at editor@artandantiques.net.



“Grammie at 90”

Rachel Woodburn

Fountain Hills, Ariz.
First and Third Place, Amateur

Polaroid Type 55 film, 4x5 pinhole camera, 50mm focal length, f176, Zlatype print

A self-confessed perfectionist, Rachel Woodburn struck photographic gold when she learned to just... let...go. “Being a designer is about perfection, and my photographs in the past have reflected that: very controlled and very designed compositionally,” says Woodburn, a college computer graphics instructor with a BFA in graphic design and photography. Desiring to push herself further, she enrolled last year in a master’s program, where she was introduced to pinhole photography. “The pinhole camera changed everything that I had been doing. It was like taking photos blindfolded, and though it was very frustrating, it also opened up all kinds of new possibilities and allowed my instincts to flow.”

Woodburn’s winning shots come from her “Water Women” series, a chronicle of eight female relatives who love the water. “A number of things happened to the women in my family the year before, and I decided it was time to go home to Michigan and take some images,” she explains. “I did about 100 4x5 negatives in three weeks, and if I was conservative with my film, I wouldn’t have been able to create these pictures.”

The haunting, ephemeral “Grammie at 90,” which garnered the first-place berth, is a five-minute exposure taken at Woodburn’s aunt’s house. “The challenge in this series was water, and it’s not something you actually see in the image, but it’s symbolic as I used water to help distract Grammie during the long exposure.” Finding a comfortable place for her to sit, Woodburn draped a towel over her grandmother so she wouldn’t get cold and then misted her with water. “We talked about walking in the rain and walks with my

papa who passed away," she says. "Grammie was a good sport."

The judges' unequivocal verdict on both images: Woodman is in a class of her own. Calling "Grammie at 90" "a beautiful object, finely printed and seductive in its handling of the materials," Cox notes that it is a photograph that combines beauty and psychological content in delicate balance. "It is wonderfully ambiguous and mysterious with the glass table in the foreground incised with lines—or are those shadows of fallen twigs?" (The lines actually are twigs placed between two panes of glass by Woodburn's aunt.)

"This image brings to mind the work of Francesca Woodman and Ralph Eugene Meatyard," Jackson says. "The composition of the woman at the end of the table and her movement brings about a sense of mystery and spirituality. In the artist's statement, she mentions she is trying to capture the inner world of women. She has truly achieved that goal with this image."

"Natalie at 6," which depicts Woodburn's niece in a 45-second exposure, is a familiar subject that under Woodburn's deft touch achieves transcendence. "She was totally aware of the camera, but wasn't conscious of it," Woodburn says. "She was running through the water, and I said, 'OK, hold still!' That image caught her at her age."

"While the composition is direct and simple, it enhances the innocence of the subject," Fischer says. "The beauty of this photograph is the subtle slanting horizon line behind the child's head," Jackson explains. "This horizon line also divides the photograph into unequal areas of gray in the background, which adds to the visual grace of this photograph."



"Natalie at 6"



“Misty Morn”

Patricia Lontor's stated technique on the contest entry form gave our judges a surprised chuckle with its refreshing candidness: "Nothing beyond focusing and shooting." "Really?" Jackson asked. "Well, good for her!"

"Misty Morn" was shot while Lontor and her husband were on vacation in Baddeck, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, last October. "It was 8 a.m. and very misty; you can't even see that there's a lake through

the fog. I saw those chairs and they seemed so lonely," says Lontor, an oil painter who captured the quiet image as inspiration for a future painting. "It looked like a good picture, but I didn't think I'd be able to depict it the same way in a painting."

Landscapes in the fog are a common, even clichéd motif, but what makes "Misty Morn" successful is its composition, the judges note. "It is one of those photographs that beckons the viewer, invites them in," Cox explains. "It's a nicely weighted composition, with the twinning of motifs at either edge. It has a very fine mastery of light."

"The composition adds to the content of the image," Fischer says. "There is a nice juxtaposition of the chairs against the double tree trunk. And the overall feel of the image is enhanced by the atmospheric perspective."

Patricia Lontor

Omaha, Neb.
Second Place, Amateur

35mm self-adjusting Canon



“Paris, Tuileries: Alexandre Combatant”

The crowds were out in the Tuileries gardens on the spring day that Martin R. Anderson set up his pinhole camera made from a tin can in front of this statue of Alexandre, but due to the almost two-minute exposure, no one is visible in the resulting image, leaving Alexandre in his heroic stance sans an adoring audience. “Statues are a held pose, but it’s not frozen emotion,” explains Anderson, a former actor, director and teacher. “When I look at a statue the energy of the emotion is still present. There’s tension, which has to be present in all art.”

“The dynamic physicality of the warrior is the central focus,” Cox says. “Every inch of this composition is well-utilized, with enough ‘open’ space for the eye to explore and discover.”

Fischer, who teaches pinhole photography, found that Anderson’s use of a

pinhole camera emphasizes the forward thrust of the image. “The pedestal becomes a prow that gives a powerful sense of movement,” he explains.

“This photograph has a strong reference to the early photographers of the medium, especially [Eugène] Atget,” Jackson notes. “Photographing decaying or damaged sculptures in this manner with the elongated view and darkened

edges adds to the mystique of this image.”

This comparison to Atget pleases Anderson, who also cites Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Walker Evans as influences. “I consider pinhole the Zen approach to photography: It’s like giving over to the great photographic gods,” says Anderson, who also teaches pinhole and plastic camera photography. “There are so many elements that you cannot control.”

Martin R. Anderson

Brookline, Mass.
First Place, Professional

Fiber-based, gelatin silver print, toned in selenium from a paper negative exposed in a self-constructed pinhole camera



“Giving It Up”

Hallelujah! You can almost hear the shouts of praise in Michael W. Ellison's triptych “Giving It Up,” which was shot at St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church in Savannah, Georgia. Ellison became acquainted with the predominantly black church while on a photo shoot for a local Catholic publication. Intrigued by the exuberant services, he requested permission to document the church's activities over a period of months. Thus, from February to the end of July, Ellison was present every weekend for Mass, baptisms and other celebrations, and “Giving It Up” is the defining image from his experience.

“When I saw this woman with her grandson and how her hands were outstretched, I knew it would be a good shot compositionally,” he says. “Her hands form a triangle leading the viewer up and then back down to her face and then that of her grandson.”

The image had to be a triptych, Ellison says, to depict the natural progression of the action. “Note how the woman

remains posed in prayer, while the grandson pauses to close his eyes,” he points out. “This center frame, in the context of the first and third, illustrates Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment. It illustrates a collective experience.”

Ellison's decision to present this entry as a triptych sparked spirited debate among the judges, who analyzed the effectiveness of the three images versus the strong center frame. “Photography is at its core a system of editing, a means for capturing and recording the world that allows you to choose,” Cox says. “Michael Ellison allows the viewer to choose, preferring to show us the unfolding of a moment, in multiple moments. The exposure here is No. 27. It's the pivotal picture in the sequence.”

“By showing three negatives, the artist depicts the changing facial expressions of the child while the woman standing behind him remains unchanged,” Jackson says. “As a documentary-style photographic series, this triptych helps to tell a story more than a single image.”

This is a good picture that keeps you looking,” Cox says of “El Día de los Muertos, La Cantera” noting that the muted palette of browns, ochres and rusts “ties it all together.” The image's color also spoke to Jackson, who explains its strength is “the juxtaposition of the stark white death masks against the ghostly movements of the individuals moving their hands against their drums.”

Nashville photographer Virgil Fox certainly knows how to tell a compelling visual tale—and is no stranger to the Art & Antiques photography contest. In 2003, “Young Patriots,” his portrait of a neighbor's grandchildren waving an American flag, earned him third place in the professional category. And Fox secured a third place spot this year again by capturing the spirit of remembrance. The New Orleans native is drawn to celebrations that mix religious and secular traditions, and thus it was perhaps through divine providence that he and his wife found themselves at the Westin La Cantera Resort in San Antonio during a Day of the Dead celebration.

“I came across these revelers and was intrigued by the motion of the characters dancing around in a circle in front of this drummer. I found their expressions went beyond their masks into their movements.” Compelled, he set up his tripod and did some timed exposures using the available dim light. “My shutter speed had to be very slow to gather enough light, and this allowed me to capture a visual echo of the

Michael W. Ellison

Savannah, Ga.
Second Place, Professional

Nikon F5, Nikkor AF 24mm, F2.8, exposure unrecorded, printed on fine art paper



“El Día de los Muertos, La Cantera”

dancers as they moved past my camera,” he says.

“This picture is unique in its quality of movement and the mystery of the masked figures,” Fischer says. “It is strong in the way it asks more questions than it answers. While it is a picture of a celebration, it has a dark side—a celebration of the macabre.” ❖

Patti Verbanas is the Executive Editor of Art & Antiques.

Virgil Fox

Nashville
Third Place, Professional

Nikon D70 camera mounted with an 18-70mm lens