

The Blossoming of Laurie Peek

By Norm Borden (lightly edited by L. Peek)

In the world of photography, it seems that Laurie Peek has done the grand tour. She's attended well-regarded workshops, learned from top photographers, earned an MFA in Photography, worked in museums, studios, darkrooms, stock photo agencies, local newspapers, taught photography, won numerous awards and recognition, has her work in museums, and now she's part of Soho Photo Gallery.

The way Laurie sees it, her work has come full circle over the course of her twenty-five + year photographic career. She started out as a fine art photographer, worked as a photojournalist, and, after a 20-year hiatus, returned to creating fine art.

Growing up in Sarasota, Florida, Laurie says, "I loved painting and drawing as a child, so my mom sent me to art classes at The Ringling Museum. When I was in high school, I remember seeing "The Family of Man" book and was transfixed at how amazing it was – that and seeing the film "Blow-Up" helped stimulate my interest in photography."

But Laurie recalls that what really piqued her interest was spending the summer of 1967 in Nantucket with some friends that included photography students from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). She says, "The next summer we went to Vermont and stayed in a house near Brattleboro that became a temporary pop-up summer gallery" showing RISD students' and teachers' photographs. I said, 'This looks interesting.'"

At Antioch College, she took a photography class, influenced by the RISD exposure. Laurie says, "I also enrolled in the work-study program where I had a job in a portrait studio darkroom. By then, I had the bug." A semester studying photography with Doug Prince at Univ. of Florida, Gainesville gave her the confidence to decide to pursue photography as a career.

After college, Laurie worked in a commercial photography studio in Boston, and showed her portfolio to Minor White who was "very encouraging." Next stop was a three-month residency at the Apeiron Workshop in Millerton, NY, a kind of photographic commune. Laurie says, "It was fantastic. People like Danny Lyons, Emmett Gowin and Paul Caponigro would come for a week to critique our work and hang out. Everyone was so approachable; it was the early 1970s and a different time in photography."

Earning her MFA in Photography in 1978 at Nathan Lyon's Visual Studies Workshop/U of Buffalo in Rochester, she says, "I studied printmaking with some amazing people like Todd Walker and Carl Sesto and filmmaking with Hollis Frampton. After graduation, I got a job teaching photography at a progressive high school in Washington, DC. I was living the life that I had imagined. I had my own darkroom and ten kids in the class, and it was fun. I met my future husband at the school, and after two years, we decided to move to New York to become artists and live in a loft.

Laurie recalls: "We needed real jobs, so I became a photo librarian at The Bettmann Archive and leveraged that to get a job as the librarian at Sygma Photo News. I saw a lot of photography and learned what got selected for *Newsweek* and other magazines. By then I was no longer so interested in the fine art world and wanted to make a difference. I said to myself, 'Why don't you become a photojournalist?' Having seen what real photojournalism was, I thought I could do this. Well, I did. I got jobs freelancing for the *Village Voice*, *Soho News*, and other papers and had a staff job on *The Brooklyn Paper* – it was very interesting, and I was making a difference." She was also a staff photographer for NYC's Department of General Services. "When "I got pregnant, however, we moved to the suburbs, and I put my photography on the shelf for 20+ years."

She returned to photography when she became gallery manager for the Art Students' League residency program in Rockland County. "I retired after about a year; by then I'd become interested in digital and started photographing seriously again."

Laurie now shoots with an Olympus and uses her iPhone a lot. She says, "My work has come full circle, because now I'm a fine art photographer again. I still have a great interest and empathy for all kinds of documentary; it's just not what I'm doing now. My current work has become more complex and maybe because of the motivation behind it, it's richer. I use layers and gilding, which I learned from Dan Burkholder. Now it's all nature and beautiful images made with composites that I create mostly with various apps. The prints I gild are done in a series of steps. I print the composite on vellum, then press five-inch squares of gold or silver leaf onto the back of the print and finish both sides with varnish. The process takes hours."

Laurie explains this project really grew out of the death of her son almost three years ago. She says, "I gave myself a year off after he died. I still took some pictures, but I couldn't focus on it. But I told myself I'm going to do something as a tribute to my son – I had no idea what it was going to be. All of a sudden, after a year had gone by, I just started photographing these different plants from my garden on white enamel trays

along with some cyanotypes pressed flowers. I just went crazy with an eruption of creative energy, and I didn't even know where it was coming from.

I'm still doing my "In Lieu of Flowers" project, but now I'm starting to make landscapes that have a kind of surrealistic feeling. The scale doesn't match so it's kind of intriguing. I like creating an image that makes you stop and say, 'Whoa, what is this? I just don't like things that are too obvious. I want it to be a bit of a challenge.'

Although Laurie had known about Soho Photo and had considered becoming a member, Covid put that idea on hold for a time. Then Laurie joined in October 2022. "I was happy to have a show right away. I love how supportive everyone is."

Clearly, Laurie has had quite a journey... and it continues.