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# LENSWORK

Photography and the Creative Process • Articles • Interviews • Portfolios • Fine Art Special Editions

No. 46 Apr - May 2003

Article  
**Frank Van Riper**

Interview  
**John Sexton**

Portfolios  
**Morrie Camhi**  
**Eva Depoorter**  
**John Sexton**

EndNotes  
by **Bill Jay**



# LENSWORK

46

APR — MAY

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*Photography and the Creative Process*  
*Articles • Interviews • Portfolios*

*Editors*

Brooks Jensen  
Maureen Gallagher

*Assistant to the Editors*

Lisa Kuhnlein

In this issue

*Article by*  
**Frank Van Riper**

*Interview by Brian Killigrew*  
**John Sexton**

*Portfolios by*  
**Morrie Camhi**  
**Eva Depoorter**  
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# EDITOR'S COMMENTS

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*Twenty Years to Break the Rules:  
Lessons from the Made of Steel Folios*

A creative endeavor is almost never a straight path, never predictable, and often clearly seen only in retrospect. In this article I'm going to allow myself a bit of personal retrospection. I will describe a creative path that eventually led me, through several lessons, to the *Made of Steel Folio*. I don't like to be so self-indulgent, but I am hoping that my process with this specific example might be useful in seeing the process of creativity – as it was lived – while this project unfolded in such unexpected ways.

In the 1970s and early 80s I was photographing landscapes, almost exclusively. One day, while out photographing in 1982, on an impulse I wandered into an old machine shop in Port Townsend, Washington – Dollar's Garage. I asked permission to make a photograph and the proprietor, Mr. Dollar, agreed. I spent the next six hours photographing his tool bench, his shop, and the artifacts of his trade. (Unfortunately, I didn't ask to make his portrait.) Little did I know that this impulsive whim would lead to one of the major photographic projects of my life. **Lesson #1:** It's amazing how many times

big things sneak up on us and take us completely by surprise.

After I developed the negatives and contact sheets from Dollar's Garage I began to look at them more carefully. I realized how many *potential* images I'd passed by – small compositions that I could now see buried in the details of the larger views on my contact sheets. I became fascinated with small machine shops, garages, and the men who work with metal and steel. For the next 19 years, as I traveled around the country, I found such businesses – such men – everywhere I went. I started photographing them with regularity, focusing on details and compositions that I responded to intuitively. I had no idea, at the time, that I was creating a photographic "project." I was just following my intuition, photographing at will, allowing myself to be fascinated with the subject material, wherever it led me. **Lesson #2:** Playing without purpose is sometimes a most creative virtue.

During the decade of the 1980s, I was deeply involved in a photographic group that met monthly to share images and

learn from each other. I started showing this work at those meetings and was surprised at the two reactions I received: *Why was I printing this work in a warm, brown tone?* (I was even asked if I was trying to make fake “old-looking” images!); and *Why was I photographing these stupid tools?* Nobody, with very few exceptions, appreciated the early work (and they may have been right). At the time, in my naiveté, I found this lack of encouragement fueled my self-doubt. **Lesson #3:** Critics are everywhere and constructive suggestions quite rare. It’s too bad, but it is often true that other photographers are often the least encouraging. In retrospect, I see I had found **Lesson #4:** Discouragement, setbacks, and self-doubt are a reality that accompany *every* creative endeavor. Each time I photographed in a machine shop, I wondered if I should have been out in the landscape. Luckily, my impulse to photograph in machine shops was stronger than my self-doubt, so I kept photographing tools and grease and having a ball. **Lesson #5:** It is handy if you can be your own cheerleader.

The breakthrough came in an unexpected way. I was invited to show a body of work to a group of people who were *not* photographers. After some vacillation, I decided to show these photographs of the old shops and tools. Not one of these people asked why I had brown-toned the images, what lens I used, what film or developer,

or which reciprocity table I employed. Not one questioned why I was photographing these things. Instead, they asked me about the people in the photographs and my experiences of photographing them. **Lesson #6:** Show your work to people outside your group of photographic friends – there is always an interesting response.

I was surprised at how easily I was able to recall stories, incidents, moments, sometimes just a phrase that had impressed me while I was photographing. For the first time, as I showed the photographs I told stories of these men and their work– and to my amazement and delight, people laughed and smiled, people *reacted* and *looked more closely* at the images. Their relationship to my images had been deepened by the stories I told. It was a revelation to me. It was more than a revelation, it was a *revolution*. **Lesson #7:** I suddenly realized that my potential as a storyteller – as a photographer – was not diminished by words, but could be *enhanced* by them. For this body of work – not for *every* body of work, but for this one – I recognized the importance of the text.

Later, I received an invitation to exhibit some work at a local nonprofit gallery. Emboldened by my previous storytelling experience, I decided to risk an experiment. I condensed and distilled the stories into a few sentences, a quote, or a quick observation – one bit of text for each

image. I then printed the text on pieces of paper which were then matted along with the photograph in a single frame, the photograph and the text each in their individual window. Certainly this was not a new idea in photography, but it was new to me – a photographer whose heroes had been the great West Coast photographers that had espoused the pure print, the white mat board, and the ubiquitous title “Untitled.” Most photographers in this vein eschewed text as being not just unnecessary, but an *insult* to the photograph. I had been raised with the maxim that *any photograph that needs text is a bad photograph because it can't stand on its own*. My personal revolution was to realize that (**Lesson #8**) such inflexible – albeit unwritten – rules are always counterproductive to the creative life. By breaking this rule about text, I found these photographs connected with an audience in ways that were not possible without it.

I exhibited 38 images with their text components and attended the opening, like all artists do, slightly holding my breath with butterflies dancing the Lindy in the pit of my stomach. It was the noisiest opening in an art gallery I have ever attended! It was noisy because people were *talking* about the photographs, *reminiscing* about their great Uncle Bob who used to have a machine shop, *laughing* out loud at the stories they read, pausing for *minutes at a time* before each image, finishing the

exhibition and starting all over again with the first photograph to go through it a second time. Never before, and rarely since, have I seen such reactions from an audience in an art gallery. To my surprise, I found I was thrilled that people were ignoring the artifact and engaging the artwork. **Lessons #9 and #10:** Never overlook the importance of content; it's what the audience relates to, not your artistic struggle or process. I also learned the difference between artists and normal people – whom a friend of mine calls *civilians*. Artists care about the artwork in the artifacts. The rest of the folks care about the *life* in the artwork.

Many people at the opening asked if I had a book they could buy – they wanted to share what they had seen, maybe offer their friends or a family member a gift. **Lesson #11:** When people connect with art, they want to own it or give it as a gift. I had always thought people buy artwork to support a struggling artist. **Lesson #12:** When “civilians” purchase art, it is because of their connection with the *artwork*, not their connection with the *artist*. Unfortunately, I didn't have a book nor the capital to publish one. Because I couldn't afford to publish a book I began to explore alternatives, and, as the maxim goes, necessity is the mother of invention.

I realized immediately that this project had three inherent limitations. This was

not wall art – not pretty picture landscapes, not large prints – so the traditional image-in-white-mat-board and frame seemed silly. Individual images, stripped of the context of their brothers and sisters, were weakened by being isolated from the group. The text was essential to the project and to the individual images! I knew this body of work needed to be exhibited and packaged as such. A book would have been ideal, but I had to think smaller. I had to think about producing something in my darkroom, in smaller quantities that I could produce on my own and within my budget. Essentially, I found myself asking: Could I make a book in the darkroom?

Here is where the creative crisis really occurred. I was taught that photographs don't need text, but this work from the machine shops seemed to sing when the text was included. I was taught the photograph is better when it's bigger, but this work was not wall art nor décor, and seemed to shine when it was small, intimate, handheld. I was taught that a photograph was supposed to be presented overmatted in a pristine white mat board, dry-mounted, signed in the lower right hand corner and overmatted with a four-ply beveled mat. But this work seemed to drown in such overproduction. I was taught that great photographs were selenium toned, but these images worked best in warm-tone. Now, I'm not rebellious by nature; by nature I respect

my elders and betters. And who was I to question the wisdom of those great photographers from the Monterey Peninsula, or Alfred Stieglitz, or *all* of my contemporaries who followed the wisdom that had become codified as *fine art photography* in 20<sup>th</sup> Century? But here it was – **Lesson #13** – that in order for this work to mature into something I was proud of, something that connected with real people, it seemed I needed to break almost every rule of photography that I had ever learned. I just needed to give myself permission to do so.

I should say that I was *not* deluded into thinking that *because* I was breaking the rules the work was good. This is an all-too-common mistake of beginners. Rather I should say that *in spite of breaking the rules* this was the way the work needed to be done. I always caution new photographers that the first task is to learn the rules thoroughly; master the tried and true. Only then will breaking the rules make sense. **Lesson #14:** The trick is to know the rules, but not be frozen by them; use the rules wisely, but know that breaking them is also a form of using them. What has amazed me since then is how many times I've seen other photographers' work that would benefit by breaking out of the codified, gallery-approved rules of presentation. Too often I see the seed of brilliant photographic work stuffed into a codified form that kills it. Nice tones and a clean mat, but vacant and hollow.

I want to gently approach these photographers and shout WAKE UP!

I'm not an extremist about this, honestly. There's nothing wrong with white mat board and an image plopped in the middle, slightly above center, with the artist's signature in the lower right hand corner. I like such work – I even still make such work. But it's not the *only* way to make photographs or artwork that is based in photography. **Lesson #15:** It's not heretical to be creative. What's the worst that can happen? Stupid artwork! But maybe, just maybe, some people might connect with your creative vision and see what you are trying to create/reflect/say/transmit with your photography. And if you only end up making stupid artwork, well, as they say: even the person who falls flat on their face is at least moving forward.

I screwed up my courage and started to let my imagination run. What if I put the text *in* the photograph? How would one do that? Thankfully I learned **Lesson #16:** Look outside photographic circles for solutions that can be joined with traditional photography. I learned I could have a service bureau output text on graphic arts film which could be subsequently contact printed in the darkroom on photographic paper. I learned about “stripping” – the process of finely positioning graphic arts film with the use of pin registration.

Using these new tools, it was possible to enlarge my original negatives in the darkroom as I had always done, and then expose my text components in the photographic emulsion itself! When the paper was processed in the chemistry, the image and the text would both be developed in the emulsion.

I was encouraged and got even bolder. What if I then added a short story printed on a few pages of art paper? What if the images were printed with generous borders in the photographic paper that didn't need mat board? I'd need some sort of a cover to hold all of this. How would I do that?

All of these questions opened the door to the creation of small “portfolios” of photographs with text. These small, book-like productions allowed me to create an intimate product without the necessity of a full-blown book project. In 1991, I created a short-run edition of three such folios all titled *Made of Steel*. The first folio was *The Portraits*, the second *The Shops*, and the third *The Tools*. Each folio had its own cover and a selection of five images from the full exhibition.

The project took *months* to complete. Each image was exposed with appropriate dodging, burning, and flashing and then a second exposure for the text and a third exposure for the key-line around

the photographs. Each image required incredible precision and hours and hours to complete. They were tortuous to make and expensive to produce. I'm not averse to hard work, but there are limits beyond which only the stupid will go. I decided to use *creative thought* rather than *brute perseverance* to see if I could find a better way.

**Lesson #17:** There is, indeed, more than one way to skin a cat. I began to wonder if the film used in graphic arts for *text* could be adapted for use in a traditional photographic darkroom for the production of *images* as well. What if I could create a perfect photographic negative that could be printed simultaneously with the text? If I could figure it out, I could create these folios so much more easily! Three years of experimenting and I had a working method to be able to do it. (This was actually the tiny seed that started me on the technological path that lead, eventually, to the LensWork *Special Editions Collection*. I've discussed this technology at greater length elsewhere, so I want to focus my comments in this article about the *creative* path.)

Now, 21 years after that first photograph in Dollar's Garage, I finally get to come full circle. After 21 years of exploring and experimenting, fumbling and stumbling around, the technology and my skills have caught up with my creative vision. I can now produce the *Made of Steel* folios as

I had hoped to do – an edition of exquisite little folios without killing myself in the process.

I never would have guessed that the photograph I made in Dollar's Garage in 1982 would lead me down such a convoluted and unexpected path. How could I know that it would challenge my notions of creativity, of photographic aesthetics, of a photograph's accessibility to an audience? But this creative challenge has been one of the most exciting adventures I've had as a photographer. In fact (**Lesson #18**), I've concluded that *creativity* and *challenge* are intimately integrated. It is not possible to have one without the other. A life of art *is* a life of challenge – of overcoming – of doing what cannot be done. If it can be done easily, if it requires no challenge, it probably is not art.

So now I produce these little "folios" as one of my fundamental art forms. I still make the occasional piece of wall art, but they are rare. I say *one of my fundamental art forms* because breaking-out of the plop-in-the-white-mat-board tradition was more mind-expanding than I originally thought. I didn't just replace mat board with folio covers – I replaced a single form with *anything I could dream up!* Image and text, image and graphics, image with a physical object montage, images that hang by strings, images in Japanese *tanzaku* or *shikishi* frames, images on

CDs, websites, images with audio – the possibilities are limitless. **Lesson #19:** Be careful of allowing yourself the freedom of creativity; it might just shatter the limits of everything you now know. Creativity – the life of an artist – is not for the timid. You might find that you make some pretty awful art – on this trust me, I know. And not everyone will like or respect (or buy or understand) your work. *It's not in a white mat board!* But you will find that (**Lesson #20**) there are those who will “get it” and it is for these people and for yourself that you create. It is for the process of exploring and finding, failing and finding, finding and sharing that you create.

My idea about folios may not be a useful idea for anyone but myself, and I'm not recommending or suggesting that folios are a replacement to the traditional presentation of photographs. The traditional presentation is, still, the *traditional* one. But, I am suggesting that the creative path sometimes leads in different directions than we would anticipate – if we are open to it. I am also suggesting that it may be possible for photography – for fine art photography – to be a great deal more

than a rectangular print in white mat board.

It seems that learning and letting go are the twin rails of the creative path. They are fueled by patience and perseverance – these four characteristics are in a continual interplay. They are an important foundation of the creative process. Funny how such an instantaneous art form as photography can take more than 20 years to materialize a final product. I find this more understandable when I realize that it is *me* that must learn and let go, and *me* that must be patient and persevere. To be an artist is to *become* an artist, and this is a process that unfolds in its own time, continually yet inconsistently, but more readily if we recognize our role and open ourselves to the work.

As Tolkien cautions us in *The Hobbit*, paths are wondrous things because we never know where they might lead us. And that is very the reason to take them.



TWENTY IMAGE FOLIO SET

# The LensWork Folios



DOLLAR'S GARAGE

1972

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What could be better than a book of photographs? LensWork *Folios* are a collection of photographs printed on real silver photographic paper to archival museum standards! No ink-on-paper compromises! Nothing can replace the depth of tonality or presence of fiberbase silver photographic paper.

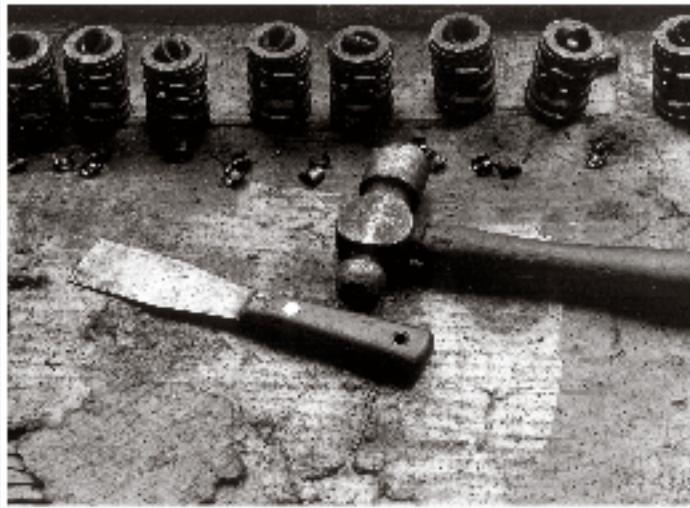
The LensWork *Folios* are sets of images – little photographic jewels that can be appreciated as hand-held art objects or even matted and framed if you choose to display them. Each photographic image is printed on double-weight photographic paper. The set of images is enclosed in a letterpress folio with embossed title. There is also a hand-printed title page and colophon which is numbered and signed by the photographer.

In contrast to today's gallery obsession with the *bigger-is-better* philosophy, we believe small and intimate photographs have a magical quality all their own.

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The LensWork *Folios* – including this work by Brooks Jensen – bring small images back to affordable collectibility for everyone. As an adjunct to our LensWork *Special Editions* program, the LensWork *Folios* extend our core concept of *Fine Art Photography at Real People Prices™* to make available to everyone exquisite works of photography. For more information: [www.lenswork.com](http://www.lenswork.com).

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# THE WOMEN OF STAPHORST



*Guardians of Tradition*



*by*

Eva Depoorter

Eva Depoorter



# BUILDING A PORTFOLIO ONE STONE AT A TIME

*by*

Frank Van Riper

With the possible exception of a perfect *tarte tatin* that Judy and I made from scratch many years ago, the stone grill in my back yard is the proudest thing I ever have made with my own two hands.

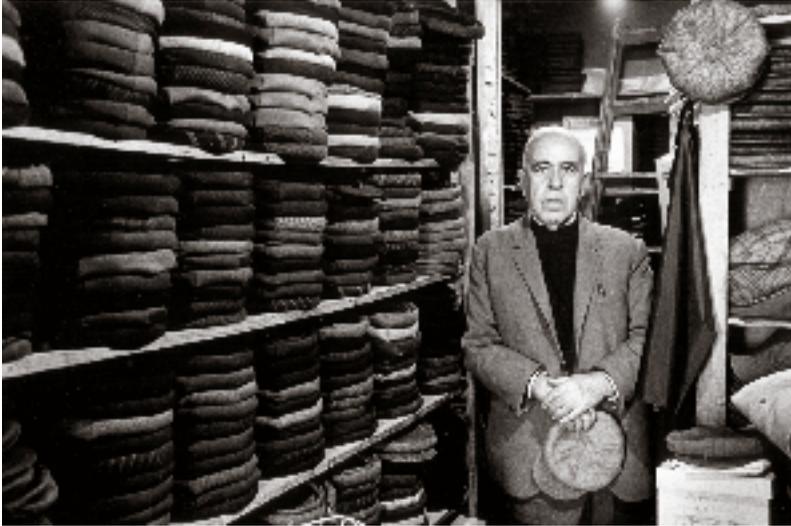
I admit that this grill, which sits proudly in the front garden of our summer house in Maine, is not the most perfect example of the stonebuilder's art. In fact, a real stonebuilder probably would look at my grill and, if he were kind, call it a very nice effort by an amateur.

But that's precisely the point.

My late friend and colleague Fred Maroon loved to say that he hoped he always would be an amateur photographer, even though he was one of the most widely published, praised and pursued professional photographers in the country. "Amateur," Fred noted, came from the Latin verb "amare," to love, and an amateur is someone who pursues a path for the sheer joy of it, not for recognition or gain. And certainly, during the two summers that my family and I worked on our grill, we had a ball.

When I was first "pursuing" a grill – being a Bronx boy who had absolutely no experience building such things, but who loved to cook and especially to cook over an open fire – I did what anyone else would do: I read everything I could on building with stone. The local library and Amazon.com loved me.

# THE JEWS OF GREECE



*by*

*Morrie Camhi*

Morrie Camhi

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This desecrated synagogue is in the town of Didimoticho. At the time that I went there, six Jews were living in this town. You'll clearly see from the size of the synagogue that at one time such a spacious and magnificent building must have housed hundreds of worshiping Jews, and perhaps there were thousands that were in the community. As a matter of fact, during the heyday of Didimoticho, before World War II, there were over two thousand Jewish residents – now reduced to six. The synagogue was desecrated because of a prank by the Nazis who, lacking some amusement, decided they would circulate the rumor that the Jews had left their valuables in the church in hidden locations. And, of course, the ruse worked. Eventually the townspeople went to look for these treasures and found none. They devastated the synagogue in the process.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SEXTON

*Interviewed by*

Brian Killigrew

It all started with Mr. Wizard.

When John Sexton was a boy, he was fascinated by a television show starring Mr. Wizard. Explaining the mysteries of science, Mr. Wizard would perform all sorts of chemical experiments, and John soon wanted his own chemistry set. John's introduction to photography began a few years later, when, still fascinated by chemical experiments, he was in a friend's dark-room and saw his first print come up in the developer. "It was magic," says John. "Magic" is a word John says a lot when it comes to photography.

Long-known for his finely crafted large-format landscape images, John has expanded his repertoire to show the beauty of man-made objects. From thousand-year-old Anasazi ruins, to what he jokingly refers to as the most expensive prop in the world – the Space Shuttle – John is pushing his work to new levels. I interviewed John at his home in Carmel Valley, California.

Brian Killigrew: When did you first feel the magic of photography?

John Sexton: The magic started on Christmas night, in 1969. A high-school friend of mine received an enlarger as a gift, and I was over that evening to see his new toy. He didn't have a safelight, so we took a light strand off the Christmas tree, got all red bulbs, and put it up in his bedroom. The enlarger was on a shaky card table, and in a little tray I saw an image appear for the first time. A week later I bought my own enlarger.

# ANASAZI RUINS



*by*

*John Sexton*

John Sexton

*From the book Places of Power by John Sexton.  
Available from Ventana Editions at <http://store.yahoo.com/ventanaeditions/>  
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*Ceiling House*

## The Editors' Afterword

Introduction: We are often asked how we choose the portfolios that appear in *LensWork*. There are varied reasons why we select work for publication. There is no formula, although a common thread often begins to appear as the selections fall into place. In this new addition to *LensWork* – the *Afterword* – we will share our thoughts on the portfolios and why they were selected for publication.

We don't publish "theme issues." Nonetheless, it does sometimes surprise us how issues of *LensWork* end up exhibiting a theme, albeit unintentionally. In this issue, the unintentional theme is *story*. All three of the portfolios in this issue are stories – the story of a community dedicated to the ways of their elders, a story of a people lost and scattered from their homes, a story of an ancient and mysterious people lost to history. In viewing these three portfolios we're looking at wonderful fine art photography, but these are not mere pretty pictures. These are photographs that communicate collectively, communicate more powerfully when seen as a group and when the *story* is engaged simultaneously while viewing the *graphics* of the photography.

Eva Depoorter's photography exhibits that wonderful quality of image-making that is so often absent from "vacation pictures of an indigenous people." Her photographs tell the story of the women of Staphorst so well because she employed the most viable tool any photographer has – time to learn about, become familiar with, and be accepted by her subject. These are not snapshots, they are *entry* for

us as viewers because she took the time to gain entry to the lives of these women.

Morrie Camhi was a longtime friend to us here at *LensWork*. One of his articles on photography appeared in first issue of *LensWork* No. 1, and the latest was an interview with Morrie in published *LensWork* No. 41 (as part of the *Legends* series by Peter Adams). Morrie was a fine photographer. More significantly, Morrie was a wonderful human being. It was this latter quality that made his photography exceptional. Morrie never took a picture of a person; he used photography to show you a glimpse of that person's personality, life, soul. Looking at one of Morrie's images, the *photograph* dissolves as we become engaged in the *world* that he photographed.

John Sexton is best known to photographers for three things: being an assistant to Ansel Adams, teaching workshops, and as a fine art photographer. Like the other photographers in this issue, John is *also* a sensitive storyteller. His vocabulary is photography with which he is masterfully articulate. John's approach to photography joins his exquisite sense of craft with his ability to condense and distill our chaotic world into images that delight in details. Each of John's images demand that we pause from our hectic schedules and look more closely at the wondrous world and remarkable light that surround us.

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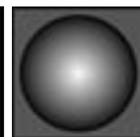
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