



Debra Achen

Fine Art Photographer

Biography

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fortress. In winter, they carved igloos into the deep snow drifts. Since her family was not much for outdoor activities, Debra's membership in the Girl Scouts of America played a major role in developing her love of nature, as well as arts and crafts. At summer camp there were guided nature hikes through the forested hills and in winter, ice-skating on frozen ponds. These activities formed the foundation for her connection to nature.

Looking back, Debra can see that her lifelong creative passion began at an early age. In school she looked forward to art class more than any other subject. As she recalls, *"I would become thoroughly engaged in the creative process no matter what the medium or subject matter."* In third grade, her sculpture won a prize in the local school art fair and she was asked to demonstrate the sculpting process during opening night. Through high school, she enrolled in every art class that was offered, even petitioning to get into what was then the all-male mechanical drawing course. Debra's parents encouraged her to pursue her love and talent for art, arranging for extracurricular classes in drawing and painting.

The Art of Photography

What does the photograph reveal about the subject and the photographer? Looking through the lens, one can see the past, the present, and even the imagined. These possibilities are what the artist uses to create a perspective of reality beyond what the camera sees. They are the tools through which fine art photographer, Debra Achen invites her viewers to celebrate the life-affirming spirit of nature in her work. Her goal is to present the world as a sanctuary to be contemplated, honored, and preserved.

Early On

The trailhead of Debra's creative journey can be found along the banks of a river in Monessen, PA, a small steel town southeast of Pittsburgh. As a child, she enjoyed spending time outdoors during all four seasons. In summer, it was gathering with neighborhood friends in a makeshift clubhouse to plan creative activities like a backyard carnival and fun house, or stacking piles of pine needles to build a



Image: *All in a Row*

College Years

After graduation, Debra majored in art education at Edinboro State University in Pennsylvania with the plan to eventually teach art at the college level while pursuing her own studio work. She studied the gamut of studio arts from drawing, painting, and printmaking to sculpture, ceramics, jewelry, and even fabric design. However, while student teaching in the classroom, she discovered that the profession was not for her.

Unsure of her next steps, she travelled to San Diego and roomed with a cousin while searching for a new path. She started by taking extension courses in film history at the University of California at San Diego, then completed her B.A. degree there in Visual Arts and Communications. Her media courses at UCSD were film, video, and photography, with training in traditional darkroom techniques.

After college, Debra lost access to a darkroom and returned to painting as her creative outlet. She joined a local artist salon in San Diego, exhibited in local venues, and completed some commissions for private and corporate clients. She supplemented her income by working in the film, television, and educational technology industries.

A Pivotal Moment

During this time Debra never put down her camera. She enjoyed taking travel photos and creating color slide presentations. Then she received a digital camera as a Christmas gift. Her reaction? *"That camera completely rekindled my love of photography and put me on the creative path to fine art photography."*

This pivotal moment coincided with a move to the scenic Monterey peninsula, an area steeped in the history of photography. Once the home of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Wynn Bullock, and others, there are individuals and

organizations here that continue to honor the traditions and mastery of craft that fostered the school of West Coast fine art photography. Now the site of her home and studio, Debra has immersed herself in this environment, attending workshops and lectures that contribute to her ongoing creative growth.

Influences Past and Present

Debra's introduction to fine art photography was through the work of Minor White, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston. She immediately resonated with their portrayal of nature and landscape. However, she was first influenced artistically by painters. She admired the ability of impressionists to render the feeling and experience of a scene, rather than simply an accurate depiction of it. The

abstract expressionists have also been a major creative influence, with their move away from realism in art.

Debra is now an active member of several fine art photography organizations including the historic Center for Photographic Art in Carmel, CA and The ImageMakers of Monterey. She finds the support and feedback from other photographers to be invaluable in her development as an artist.

She also joined a local women's photography group called FotoSága. Facilitated by

renowned fine art photographer, Carol Henry, the focus of this group is to develop one's artistic vision through lectures on history and current trends in photography, live models in the studio, field excursions, critiques, lessons on presentation, and portfolio development... all culminating in group exhibitions. Her observations about this experience: *"In just a few years, I progressed exponentially on both technical and artistic levels through participation in FotoSága."*



Image: Sand Reliefs

"I have always loved patterns, textures, abstracts and nature photographs and you have beautifully combined all of those elements in your work."

- Steve Dakin, Collector, San Jose, CA



Image: *Backlit Palm*

"Debra has an amazing flair for experimentation and creativity with her subject matter. Her innovative ideas for execution and the effects achieved keep on wowing our visual senses."

- Graeme and Linda Smith, Brisbane Australia



*"Dancing Flames" series at
The Weston Gallery, Carmel, CA*

Exhibitions and Awards

Debra's photography has been featured in over 20 International Juried Exhibitions throughout the U.S. and in Europe. She has also been included in a number of group exhibitions including *"Fire and Water"* at the Weston Gallery in Carmel, CA and *"The Elementalists"* with William Giles and Carol Henry at Carmel Visual Arts Gallery. Her work has been nominated for the prestigious *Black and White Spider Awards* in 2017, 2018, and 2019.



Debra in her studio with a handmade digital print of *"Rock of Ages"* from her *"ChromaSynthesis"* portfolio.

Future Focus

Through her ongoing portfolios of work, Debra continues to focus on her goal of presenting the natural world as a sanctuary. In her words: *"The exploration of nature on all levels is at the heart of my photography. I can't think of better words to describe it than these by John Muir: "The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness."*