

Maggie Taylor

THE PHILOSOPHER'S DAUGHTER



by Abigail Ronck

Maggie Taylor was a little brunette in a bathing suit from Ohio. She was once a student at Yale University and a marathon runner, a holder of odd jobs and a collector of all things pocket-sized. She is the wife of famed master photographer and darkroom wizard Jerry Uelsmann; Maggie herself is a digital dynamo. A visual architect on the computer, she is the grand orchestrator of choose-your-own-adventure images and plays the daily role of provisional philosopher's daughter when it comes to laying groundwork and seeding for their thematic wanderings. That is really to say that Maggie is a woman who works in a world of sophisticated fables, inside the lives of characters claiming the stillness and "we-are-not-quite-what-we-look-like" quality of René Magritte's work. **Hers is a visual village into which you arrive, blindfolded and without orientation—apart from some implicit and immediate gravitation toward beauty in the strangest of proportions.**

It seems there should be some specific and sparkly way to describe Maggie's images but perhaps it's better that she can't come up with anything. They are just too lucid/dreamlike/lovely and fantastical to describe with words. "They are narrative," she finally says. "That's a boring word but they do sort of lead you into a story world—but you're not quite sure where that world is. Once there, you have to invent your own reality."

So there's no story in mind when she sits down at the computer, opens a blank Photoshop canvas and starts adding layers—the background alone usually composed of five or 10—of anything from a scanned, crumpled piece of paper, an old 19th century portrait, or butterfly wings? "There really isn't," she says. "I think of my images more as character studies, as people auditioning for a play in a strange, private theater. They remind me of characters standing on a stage and I kind of like that."

"The Great Puzzle," 2006

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NOW AUDITIONING:

a kinetic kid from Ohio:

Maggie was born in Cleveland, OH, where she lived until about 11, before moving to Florida—a state to which she would eventually return and begin her adult life.

a highly employable Yale grad:

It seems Maggie has always been gifted with a very active mind, an attention to color, a knack for recognizing the coordination between objects and the thoughtfulness that accompanies their juxtaposition. A philosophy major in college, she studied photography as an adjunct three out of her four years before moving to Boston, where she tried her hand at seven different jobs. “I just bounced around and tried a lot of different things. Part of the time I worked at an art museum in the office as a secretary and part of the time I did some stock photo research. I worked as a slide librarian at the Harvard architecture slide library in Boston too.”

a mind in motion... tending toward stills:

“I always wanted to go back to school for photography; it was just a question of which program would be the right fit.” Of enrolling to earn an MFA in photography from the University of Florida, Maggie says, “At that point I was not doing experimental photography at all. I was doing more straight photographs in black and white and little bit of exploration with color like urban surroundings or suburban landscapes. So it wasn’t at all like the still-life work I started doing a little bit later. I had a medium-format camera. Everyone who was a graduate student at University of Florida at that time (in the mid-80s) was doing very eclectic work.” Meanwhile, Maggie says her traditional work was meeting some resistance from her peers. “Other people were painting on their photographs and making sculptures and including photographs. They were really doing a lot of very emotional and interpretive things. My work was pretty straight.”



“Subject to Change,” 2004



“Woman with a Stone Skirt,” 2005



“Cloud Sisters,” 2001

AUDITION CALLBACKS FOR:

the Midwestern girl with a past:

After Maggie’s first semester in Florida, she searched for ways to make her work more personal. “I started taking old family snapshots and arranged them into collages and re-photographed them,” she says. “It became fabricated photography, almost like keeping a diary, like remembering childhood episodes and things that happened in my family. So it was through that exploratory period when I tried to make more personal photographs, and in the end I decided I like doing color still-life work—but that was all before the computer.”

CASTING:

all/one in the same:



"The Patient Gardener," 2007

As life and adulthood dictate, all characters and roles eventually become one. Childhood. Education. The future. "I think in some ways it all kind of filters out into the work but it's not a conscious thing," Maggie comments. "The things you study in college form your world view, make you question things, make you have a more curious attitude about things." And then of course there's the inculcation of advancing technology into the field of photography—and Maggie's pushing for its maturation much before it was even ready for her.

"When I was in grad school I did take one computer digital art course. It was the very first offered there at the University of Florida. It was so basic compared to what there is now. It was more about programming. You had to use APL programming language and program the color for individual pixels so it was not at all possible to see that as a way of making art at that point. It was way too slow."

That said, Maggie spent the next 10 years shooting 4x5s and color still-life work—just "regular, straight photographs," except inclusive of the idea of compositing long before it was a technical process. "If I found some particularly interesting flower or caterpillar, it would get incorporated into my still life. I wasn't really collaging," she says, "I was placing objects on the ground and photographing them in the late afternoon sunlight. Sometimes the images have words in them too, little snippets of stories. They were narrative still lifes."

It was in the mid-90s that Maggie started to see high-resolution digital prints in galleries. At the same time, in 1996, she says, "The people from Adobe asked my hus-

band, Jerry, if he would do an image they could use for a poster for Photoshop version 2.5. It was the first version of Photoshop that included layers. They sent someone to our house to set up a computer." A darkroom guru by trade, Jerry never took to the computer—but Maggie did. "I thought, well I might as well try a few things," she says. "I thought it would be great to have the freedom to move objects around after they were photographed. To edit them on the computer sounded fun."

Although Maggie Taylor was one of Photoshop's early users and now boasts version CS4, hers is a start and a story that confirm sophistication of equipment does not always indicate sophistication of art produced. In the beginning, she was simply drum-scanning her film and importing the digital files into Photoshop to retouch. The work was no less impressive than hers today, just pricey to make. "That seemed not only expensive," she says, "but there was a time lag when it came to sending off the film. Really from the beginning, I realized that if I wanted to play around with the computer and see what the possibilities are, the quickest thing for me to do is take some of my little objects and put them right on the scanner." Three-dimensional dolls, tiny chairs, flowers, trinkets, little broken bits and pieces of watches

and jewelry—anything—she scanned and put right into Photoshop. "I now use a digital camera to capture parts of things, like background pieces and little objects too and then I use a scanner for most everything else," says Maggie. Even today, the digital cameras she's referring to are a Canon Elph point-and-shoot and a digital Leica—both just 10-megapixels.

In 2001, Maggie purchased her first Epson printer to try her hand at printing in-house. By 2003, she owned a few more wide-format printers and was outputting all of her own images in sizes ranging from 8 to 42 inches wide. Although to this day she'll work on multiple images at once, it takes about a month to complete a single piece. And though her gallery images aren't necessarily themed or categorized, they do borrow inspiration from each other even as they stand alone. "As images evolve, they have an interplay with each other. I can't have all the images be blue and green or if one has this element, another one can't."

While her husband spends days in the darkroom, Maggie spends equal time building and editing in Photoshop. Akin to a sculptor, "I keep adding and trying different things. I pile and pile into the file until at some point, I reach a point of over-saturation—and I'm not talking about too much color," she says. "That's when I begin to simplify the image, really pare it down and take layers out. The tendency with Photoshop is for things to get very busy with overuse of filters and patterns. I try to resist that temptation." Working a pretty regular schedule, from nine to five, Maggie says, "I love working on the computer. I don't mind feeling like I have a desk job."

CURTAIN CALL:

coming back undone...



The Herald, from her "Almost Alice" series, 2006

Given that Maggie's only series work was inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, all of whose characters were based on actual people whom Carroll knew, Maggie's fascination with the story and its pictorial representation are telling. "I actually started working on the *Alice* series by accident," she says. "I had done a number of images with rabbits and holes in the ground. I have a small porcelain rabbit that scans really nicely. The rabbit really is a strange animal—we don't know if it's domestic or not. That [thought] filtered into the work in some way." After viewers began alluding to Maggie's images as reminiscent of Carroll's famed Victorian story, Maggie set out to make more—45 in total, one for each of the book's chapters—over a period of about three years.

When it comes to her other imagery, does she (like Carroll) take influence from the people she's met in her life? "There are little bits and pieces that are autobiographical," Maggie admits. "But for the most part I think of the characters as strangers who have wandered into my computer or studio. Then I try to figure out what they would like to do. I, myself, don't photograph people so everyone in my work is anonymous."

This idea of anonymity is pretty striking, especially given some of her image's subject matter. When asked about the origin of "Philosopher's Daughter," (see right) Maggie offers, "The background is a photo that Jerry took of me standing and looking out the other direction. The woman photographed was done so from the waist up. I wanted her standing in this strange place." Meanwhile, her skirt is made of a shell; she is blindfolded and surrounded by tiny horses. And the title? "I don't know what to say about

why it's called 'Philosopher's Daughter,' " she says. "The title is usually a last thing for me. A lot of times I don't know the title until I have to send it off somewhere. I like it to be simple and not too instructive or definite. So I don't know why I just thought she was the philosopher's daughter. I guess part of it is because I'm in the background of that image and my dad was kind of a strange character and weird storyteller. He had died 10 years before I made that image. So I always sort of had this idea that I studied philosophy in college because it was something that my father could relate to in some way. But other people wouldn't know that so what's going through my mind in terms of when I'm working on the image is totally different than someone else's experience of the image.

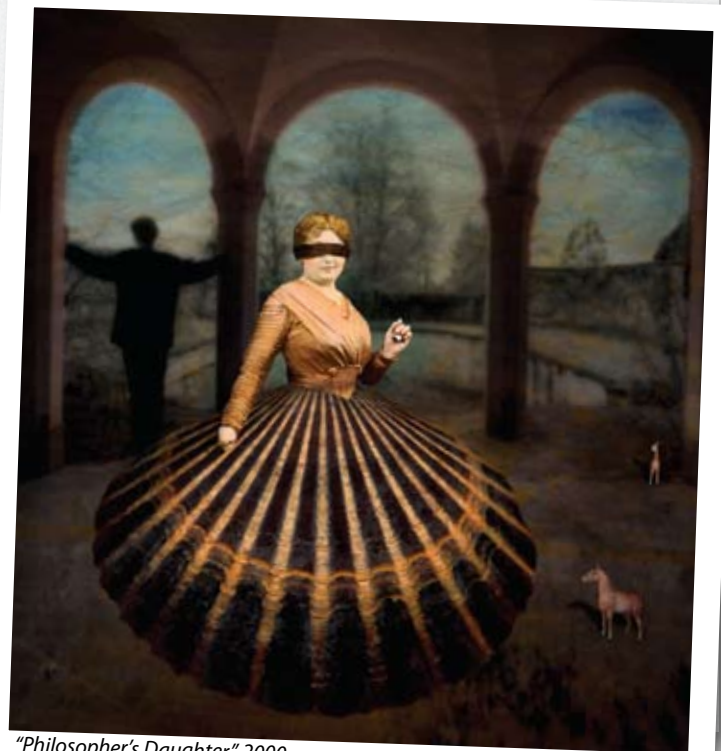
"I just really love that she has strange little horses around her," she concludes. "And you can't tell if she's extra large or they're extra small or maybe they are just ideas of horses."

More or less, that does seem to be the case here—and thereafter when looking at all of Maggie Taylor's images. You can't quite get a visual grasp on people's size, their moods, whether or not you've met them somewhere, whether maybe Maggie knows them quite intimately, or if they really are just momentary figments of some past dream world, too far away and sleepy to understand.

To see more of Maggie Taylor's work, look for her upcoming gallery show at Lanoue Fine Art (www.lanouefineart.com) in Boston this November and visit her website at www.maggietaylor.com.



Abigail Ronck graduated from Brown University in 2005 with a degree in English. She is currently the managing editor of Rangefinder and AfterCapture magazines. Contact her via email at aronck@rfpublishing.com.



"Philosopher's Daughter," 2000