

ON THE RISE: SHARON GREEN

BY JAMES A. COTTER

Sharon Green seems like a practical woman. She is highly educated, well spoken and has a polite, careful cadence to her voice. In conversation, Green gives one the impression that she could be a nuclear scientist or a computer programmer. Hidden deep beneath this austere presentation, however, lives the soul of a wild woman. One look at her photography, vividly abstract, playful, and cunning, one senses that Green's calling is firmly rooted in her ability to transform basic shapes into moving, kinetic, wholly unpredictable designs. As a photographer, teacher, and student, Green has emerged as one of photography's more innovative players, by shooting both the abstract and the concrete with equal prowess.

Like many aspiring photographers, Green became enamoured early in life with the art form. As a young child, Green remembers sitting with her grandmother looking at a book of Elliot Porter's photographs as well as family snapshots, both of which sparked her initial interest. In high school, she picked up her first camera and found that photography offered her a purpose and an identity at that awkward stage of life. Green became a consummate observer, attending school events not as a participant, but as the eyes and ears of her classmates. "I took to it instantly. There was a magic to it. To take images from film and watch them develop right before your eyes was quite amazing." Green would take from her high school years a dual passion, a love and appreciation of image making and a love of the dynamic between student and teacher. With her entrance into higher educa-



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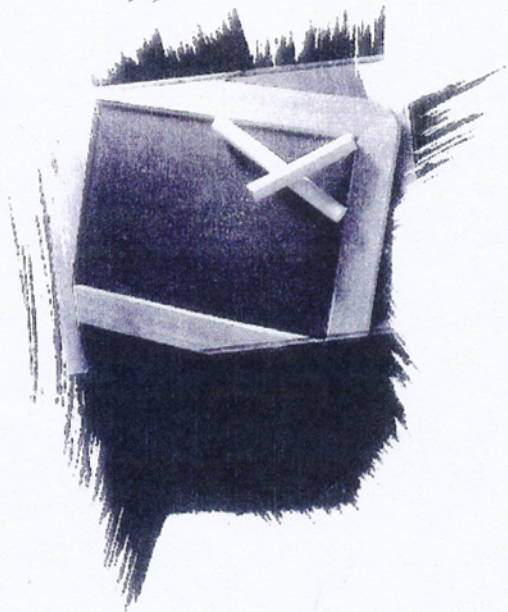
tion, Green would solidify the influences that contributed to her work as both a teacher and a photographer. At the University of Oregon, Green studied art history, with a concentration in abstract expressionism, surrealism, and constructivism. Attracted to the subconscious symbols represented in the works of 20th century artists, and the idea that even the most abstract painting is rooted in the basic laws of geometric form, Green found her niche in academia—but found her passion in the more cerebral elements of photography, with little pragmatic basis for employment. She planned on translating her knowledge into a job at a museum or gallery after graduation. When the final notes of “Pomp and Circumstance” came to a close, however, Green found her prospects were clearly not what she had hoped they’d be. “I was naive. I did get a job in a museum, but they put me in the gift shop selling postcards.”

The disappointment proved to be a blessing. Upon returning to her native California, Green enrolled in the Brooks

Institute for a second bachelor’s degree in photographic science and illustration, a comprehensive study of both the technical and artistic aspects of the medium. The niche she had found so empowering earlier in life was still there. Additionally, Green felt the pull of teaching, drawing from her own positive experience in education. After finishing her degree she was offered a position at San Francisco University High School, a renowned public school with a superior arts program, as a photography instructor. With all the pieces in place, Green embarked on a four-year stint at the school and found the experience immensely rewarding.

Through teaching Green was able to hone her own craft while at the same time influence students in a positive and creative manner. “I’ve often felt about education that although you are teaching them the medium, you’re also teaching them about themselves and building their self esteem.” By her third year, Green began to “get itchy.” She took advantage of a faculty development program that allowed her to

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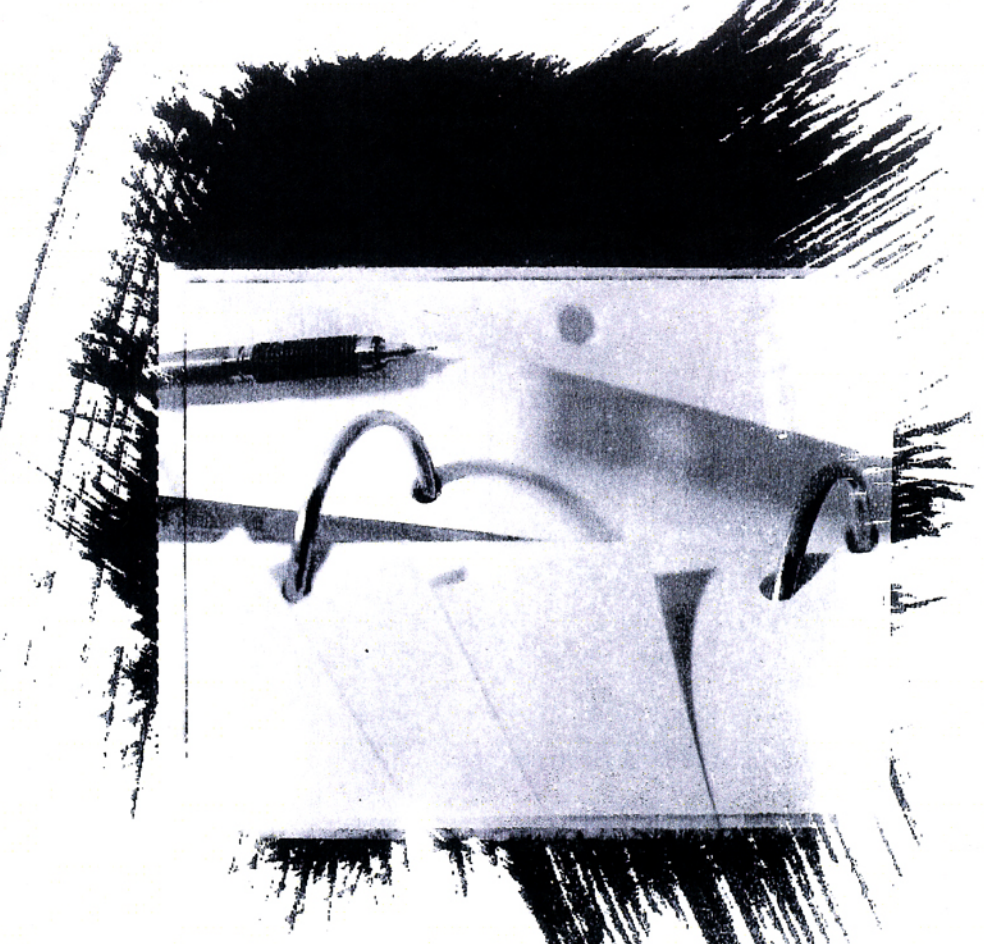


return to school to pursue a master's degree in photography at the Academy of Arts College in San Francisco. While still teaching, Green began to recognize that she wasn't as active in the commercial realm as she wanted to be and that her personal style needed development and attention. She decided that the time had come to leave teaching and engage in photography full time. The result of her graduate work was a project titled "The Symphony of Sight" that brought together Green's influences from her art history background coupled with her commitment to working as a serious artist. Green chose to focus on alternative photographic processes and worked with abstract forms to create her portfolio.

Challenging conventions of shape and form, she rendered compositions that were both dazzling and intuitive. Using platinum palladium emulsion, allowing the brush strokes to break from the boundaries of the frame, Green strove to create "sound for the eye." Influenced by the composer Stravinsky's *Poetics of Music* and the artist Kandinsky's *Point to Line to Plane*, the concept of exhibiting sound with a visual representation is an exercise designed to allow the viewer to find meaning and definition in the image. Green explains, "In a particular defined space, such as the parameters of a camera format, you have the option of putting something in the frame. By the mere positioning of the subject, you control the viewer's response. If you reduce what you're photographing to pure abstract shapes such as the circle or the triangle, they themselves carry a certain direction and rhythm." The "sounds" that are produced are a result of the positioning of these shapes when juxtaposed against other forms that produce an image that one sees with the eye but hears in the mind. The interpretation of these symbols in Green's photography is more important than the subject itself. Although figures are used as a vehicle through which Green places these shapes, the archetypal forms are what drive the image and create the response. The complex and rather technical aspects of this kind of photography belie the natural and innate feeling of the work, the very reason Green received instant acclaim. In 1997, the South Eastern Museum of Photography, in Daytona, Florida, included Green's photographs in their installation "Fresh Work," and eventually her photos became part of their permanent, private

collection. From that body of work, she put together a portfolio that attracted the attention of graphic designers and illustrators who took to the intricate, detailed presentation of Green's photography. Ironically, with the proliferation of the computer and its ability to reproduce the essentials of Green's style, graphic designers often pilfer the photographer's ideas in less time than she can produce an original by merely manipulating images in Photoshop. "It's funny, when the computer decided to show up, it was great, but suddenly this technique I had mastered, that took me hours upon hours to do and is process oriented—now someone could do with the click of a mouse. That was kind of hard to take," Green adds with a chuckle.

Green has expanded her range as an artist and as a businesswoman by working in portraiture and photographing modern furniture. She finds that by straddling the line between the purely artistic and the purely commercial, she is able to create fulfilling work that satisfies both her soul and her bank account. "I don't think there's the notion that one has to be a struggling artist like Van Gogh in order to be taken seriously. I love working with clients and I like the challenge of pushing myself creatively."

Green also finds similarities between teaching and her collaboration with clients. "They are very similar. You get to learn about someone and their needs, you get to problem solve, you get to produce something together that is mutually beneficial." Green sees herself working in many different capacities in the future. Because of her proximity to the furniture district in Berkeley, California, she certainly expects to use the area as her bread-and-butter client base. But she also has in mind expanding her portfolio to include more computer-enhanced and manipulated work. "At first I was threatened by the technology. Now I embrace it and see its worth." Finally, Green is looking to return to teaching for the sheer satisfaction of sharing the development of her craft with others. "Now that I've been out there in the professional world, I believe I have much more to offer students." Look for Green's work online at www.themagazine.org. 

James A. Cotter is a history teacher and a freelance writer. Based out of Montclair, New Jersey, he is a frequent contributor to *Photo Insider* and has written for *PDN* and *d Culture*.

For more information on Sharon Green you can contact her through Nonstock at 1-800-873-6222; or visit her website at www.planetpoint.com/sharongreen