

The Eye of the Intimist

The poetic nature of photographer Joyce Tenneson

PROFILE JOYCE TENNESON

by Rebecca Falzano

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Photographer Joyce Tenneson (opposite) on the other side of the camera in her meditation room at her home in Rockport. Tenneson designed this room to be a part of her creative practice. "I worked for years in a studio in the middle of New York City, so I really had to create a private world around me where the people I photographed would feel comfortable and relaxed," says Tenneson.

In her studio (top), Tenneson and her son, Alex Cohen, hold up a portrait of Elva Azzara (2002) from *Wise Women*, one of Tenneson's thirteen books. "There are so many shoots I remember with a photographic memory. Elva was a 93-year-old woman from California who was very shy about being photographed. When I asked her if she had something she'd like to share with my readers she said, 'Oh, I wouldn't have anything important to say.' So I just told her to close her eyes and tell me the first thing that comes to mind. She closed her eyes and as I took that one frame she said, 'You know, I can still remember what it feels like to love with all my heart.'"

After *Wise Women*, Tenneson took a break to focus on flowers for her book *Intimacy*. "I shot each flower as if it was a portrait. I tried to find something unusual and intimate about each one that I had never seen before," she says. This photograph (above), titled "Sunflower" (2005), will be featured at Dowling Walsh Gallery's inaugural photography exhibition in July.

On Joyce Tenneson's kitchen table, a single pink rosebud rests in a white clam shell, the tiniest pool of water quenching its thirst. Beyond the flower, past sliding-glass doors, Rockport Harbor is barely visible through the fog. When Tenneson placed the rose in the shell this morning, it was only a bud, but by afternoon its petals have unfurled into a full blossom. In this one delicate decorative touch, the major features of Tenneson's photographic style are encapsulated: nature, simplicity, intimacy, transformation, and exquisite beauty. "Surrounding myself with small things like this gives me such happiness," she says. "It's never about the big moments for me; it is always more about the intimate details."

Despite her appreciation of the quieter moments in life, Tenneson's illustrious career has been filled with many "big moments." Widely considered to be one of the most influential female photographers in history, Tenneson's curriculum vitae includes thirteen photography books, numerous awards and magazine covers, and more than 150 exhibitions worldwide. Her style is often described as ethereal, even mystical, and her most famous photographs are of the female form shrouded in diaphanous fabric to portray only the deepest elements of the human condition. Tenneson's fascination with female subjects stems from a childhood

spent among women; she grew up on the grounds of a convent, one of three daughters, and her mother had seven sisters. "I connect very easily with the female energy; it has always surrounded me. I think that's part of my voice," she says.

After traveling all over the world for her career, Tenneson moved to Rockport from Manhattan five years ago. But her love affair with Maine began three decades ago, when she first started teaching at the Maine Media Workshops, formerly the Maine Photographic Workshops. Today, she is still actively involved in the Workshops and even serves as the vice president of its board. "Maine just really got in my blood," she says. In addition to placing Tenneson closer to her son, Alex Cohen, and his family, the move has connected the artist with one of her other great loves: nature. "I feel a primal connection to the ocean and to the tide and to the seasons. I love waking up early in Maine and discovering what kind of day it's going to be. For me, it's an act of really paying attention. I love to be astonished every day by the simple beauty of things in our ordinary environment. I think Maine helps us to do that," she says.

Some people believe that a name can set the stage for a person's life, and this appears to have been the case for Tenneson. "My teachers would often say, 'With a name like Joyce Tenneson, you're bound to be an artist,'" she says, referring to James Joyce and Alfred Lord Tennyson. As a child growing up outside Boston, Tenneson found her calling early



Tenneson in her studio with her portrait of Christine Lee from *Wise Women* (top). Tenneson moved to Maine from New York City five years ago after a thirty-year history teaching at the Maine Photographic Workshops (now the Maine Media Workshops) every summer. "I get up in the morning, look out the window, and say a little prayer of gratitude for this day and the beauty I see all around me. I feel so connected to nature here. It centers me and focuses me and slows me down," she says.

A photograph of Suzanne (1986) (above) from Tenneson's book *Transformations*. Published in 1993, it was the first book to feature her color work. Tenneson often uses fabric to drape and neutralize the figure, giving the viewer a chance to look more deeply into the soul of the subject. "It allows you to look at the face without being distracted by anything superficial like a designer outfit. I'm not interested in that outer facade. I think that when we strip ourselves down and take off the socially acceptable facades we all wear, we're more vulnerable," she says.

An early self-portrait of Tenneson from 1976 (opposite). The photographer was a model for Polaroid before receiving a grant to use Polaroid's 20x24 camera. "I think for an artist, your voice or your signature is like your identity, your thumbprint," she says.

in life. "I didn't know whether I was going to be a writer or a painter or a poet, but I knew I would be an artist. And the minute I picked up a camera, I was really hooked," she says.

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After modeling for Polaroid and earning her master's degree in photography from George Washington University, Tenneson received a grant to use Polaroid's 20x24 camera. "It was like a refrigerator on wheels," she says with a laugh. After working with the bulky camera in her

studio, Tenneson fell in love with its emulsion, a special blend hand-spooled in Cambridge. "It was one of a kind. The photographs came out 20 by 24 inches and you only had that one. You really felt it was magic. You didn't overshoot—you couldn't overshoot! There was no motor drive. It really forced you to slow down and consider each exposure," Tenneson recalls.

Today, rather than feel devastated by the decline of her beloved Polaroid, Tenneson is grateful she had such a successful run with it. "I feel that with every closure, a new door can open. It's an opportunity to grow in new ways," says the photographer, who embraced the transition to digital about ten years ago. "Ultimately in all the arts, it's not the technology that matters; it's the eye of the artist," she says.

The eye, or voice, of the artist is something Tenneson refers to often when discussing her craft, and she was fortunate to develop hers early in her career. Tenneson's eye is so finely tuned, and her style so unique, that her photographs are immediately recognizable as her work. "I think for an artist, your voice or your signature is like your identity, your thumbprint. I always had a poetic nature growing up and that led me to photograph intimate subjects and that really developed my eye, my personal style, my own voice," she says. Part of Tenneson's signature style centers on the use of people as her principal subject matter. Rather than capture physical qualities alone, her portraits seek to reveal the human form in a way that delves deeper. "I think that I am an intimist. By that I mean that I am really interested in the intimate qualities of life. What I like about photography is that it allows me to meet people and to really probe below the surface of them. When you're photographing someone, you're always talking to them, watching them, observing them in slow motion. I love photography's ability to really allow you to understand the human condition in an often profound way," she says.

This month is a busy time for Tenneson. The Portland Museum of Art is hosting a show—*Sisters in Time, Affinities in the Work of Julia Margaret Cameron and Joyce Tenneson*—that compares her work to that of the nineteenth-century photographer. Tenneson is also the inaugural exhibitor at Dowling Walsh Gallery's new second-floor space devoted to photography. In addition, she is teaching her annual weeklong immersion class at the Maine Media Workshops this month. "People come to workshops at a crossroads. They may not know exactly



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what it is, but they're questing for something. And that's an amazing opportunity to be involved in someone's transformation," she says. As for what's next, Tenneson says she is always working on a new book project—this time two book projects. "I think books are an art form in their own right," she says.

Of all of her moments behind the camera, Tenneson says her most profound experience was working on her book *Wise Women*, for which she photographed and interviewed women between the ages of 65 and 100. "The women really revealed themselves to me. The lessons they had to share were that the intimate relationships they had with both friends and family, in the end, were the most important to them," she says. At 64, Tenneson understands this well. "I went the route of the New York career, traveling around the world on assignments, overbooking myself all the time. Life is a circle. I'm coming back now to

appreciate and be a part of what really has always given me the most pleasure—to be intimately connected with nature and my family," she says. "Maine helps me be more balanced. Each day is a gift."

As the fog lifts and clouds become visible above the harbor, Tenneson looks out over the water, her blue-green eyes glowing. She is reminded of a man she recently saw rowing across the bay at sunset in a small rowboat. "He was the only one on the harbor. To me, it seemed like a mysterious existence because I have never rowed across there by myself. I felt like I was watching a miracle, overwhelmed by the simple, almost holy, divine moment that is now."

True to her name, Joyce Tenneson is a photographer with a poet's soul. **MH+D**

For more information, see Resources on page 96.