

Between Realism and Abstraction

For Geri Dibiase, going digital creates new opportunities for her photo-art

INTERVIEW BY ROB KUNZIG

For photography artist Geri Dibiase, reality is relative. “I used to be such a purist,” she says, her eyes passing over a recent series of images that practically shout with digitally-enhanced fluorescent colors. “Now I can’t help fussing with my photographs.”

Her piece “Halcyon Days” is a good example of what happened when Dibiase “went digital” last May, a move she says she made “kicking and screaming.” A younger Dibiase, the realist, would have taken the picture of Rehoboth’s Silver Lake and let it be; but as it stands, “Halcyon Days” is a pointillist daydream, broken down into dots in candy hues of pink and teal.

“Maybe this is my frustration coming out,” she muses, “because I don’t know how to paint.”

Dibiase got her first camera, a Kodak Instamatic, as a Christmas present in eighth grade. She never lost her thrill for the fundamental magic of the photograph — the flash, the click, the invisible alchemy that occurred within the

little black box. Her mother was vexed by her choice of subjects: “You never take pictures of people,” she complained. Instead, Dibiase photographed asparagus and dozens of sunsets.

Though she grew up in Manayunk, a Philadelphia neighborhood, Dibiase spent her summers at her aunt’s house in Fenwick Island, where she began to mentally assemble



Photographer Geri Dibiase holds a glass ornament with one of her images painted inside. Behind her is “Morning Stillness,” one of her most popular photographs.

the boats, lighthouses and seaside vistas that would become her subject material years later. The scenes themselves were so striking that it seemed unfair to tamper with them in a darkroom. The subject had to speak for itself.

"If I can't compose with only my camera," she says, "I might as well hang it up."

Although she has now entered the world of digital photography, Dibiasse still sometimes shoots old-fashioned slide film. The result, she says, is a "tiny picture," a finished product in and of itself, the color and cropping unalterable.

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"At the moment of the shutter — that's when I compose," Dibiasse says. "Sometimes it's just being in the right place at the right time."

Dibiasse is used to the blessings and disappointments of randomness. A fruitful day, she says, is two good shots out of a roll of 36, and sometimes, it's the last few. That was the case with "Morning Stillness." On a fog-shrouded morning in Ocean View, she was shooting a dead butterfly on a pier. Discontented, with only two shots left, she suddenly realized that while she was sunk in concentration, the fog had lifted, revealing a tattered old boathouse reflected in the creek. Spellbound, she took a light-meter reading, and snapped her last two shots. The picture became her best seller. "I was very lucky that day," she says, "and I am very grateful."

After years of shooting the coast as a visitor, Dibiasse moved from Manayunk to Lewes in September 2005. She had managed a gallery and art store in the Philadelphia neigh-

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Art Department



DiBiase's photographs are featured on glass candleholders and Christmas ornaments through a process called eglomise, or "gilded glass."

borhood by herself for 15 years, and she was burnt out. A move to the Delaware beaches had always been the subject of daydreams and distant plans, and, in a fit of frustration, she decided to head south. She sold her store, and before moving south, she "bounced around in the ornament business" and developed an idea that would come to benefit her new life.

Eglomise, derived from the French "verre églomisé," or "gilded glass," is a process in which an image is painted backward on the inside of a pane of glass. DiBiase sends her photographs to a group of Chinese artists, who use small brushes to paint them on the inside of holiday ornaments. They also create glass candleholders with DiBiase's pictures inside.

In Manayunk, DiBiase made ornaments for The Hill School, a private school in Pottstown, Pa. When she moved to Lewes, iconic images of Dolle's Candyland on the Rehoboth boardwalk adorned the inside of glass globes. DiBiase sold the ornaments wholesale to local churches, including St. Anne's Catholic Church in Bethany Beach and All Saints' Episcopal Church in Rehoboth Beach.

"The [sales of] ornaments are pretty steady," she admits. "It helps in times when the photography sales are slow."

After succumbing to the march of technology when she started using a Nikon D50 digital camera a year ago,

Just a Click Away

Geri Dibiase's photographs and glass art are available on her Web site at www.GerisCamera.com. Prices range from \$150 to \$500.

Her works have been shown at such Rehoboth restaurants as Cloud 9, Dish and Café Zeus, as well as at the Delaware Arts Gallery in Fenwick Island. Her work will be on display at St. George's Episcopal Church's Christmas Fair in Harbeson on Dec. 6, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. ■

Dibiase is feeling the tremors of what may be an artistic shift. Her deliberate approach to a shot remains the same — those aspects of composition are too deeply ingrained to fade. However, the formerly final shutter snap is now the beginning of a process that ends on a computer screen.

Her new works are brash and bright, full of sudden and vigorous life. She speaks about them with nervous energy. She knows she's in unfamiliar territory, which both stimulates and scares her. She's never understood abstract art, she says, because the realist in her was too dominant. Using a simple digital distortion, however, has revealed a new way of making art — by focusing on the emotional rather than the pictorial, the suggestive rather than the literal.

She still does slide photography — it's where she's most at home — and she still shoots sunsets — "They always sell well," she says — but Geri Dibiase is coming to like the click of the computer mouse almost as much as the snap of the shutter. Some part of her still savors the finality of a single deciding moment, but the potential afterlife of her images intrigues her: what if trees were, after all, orange, and the beach purple?

She raises the light meter, pushes the button, and takes a reading on her next project: artistic evolution. ■

ROB KUNZIG is a freelance writer who lives in Lewes.

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