

# Shadow & Light Magazine

Discovering the Art of Photography



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image: Diana Bloomfield

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# Featured Photographer

## *Diana Bloomfield*



*Girl With Pomogranate.* ©Diana Bloomfield (full cover image), tricolor gum bichromate print

Tim Anderson: Would you share with us a bit of your background, and what enabled you to become a fine art photographer?

Diana Bloomfield: I am a native North Carolinian and grew up in a small town very near the Virginia border, a town dominated by textile and tobacco mills. This was also where my parents were born and raised, so this was a town where everybody knew you, and they knew your parents and your grandparents. At the time, the whole place seemed stifling to me, but now that I'm much older, I fully appreciate and miss that real sense of connectedness.

Southerners tend to grow up around story-tellers, and my family was no exception. If anything enabled me to become a fine art photographer, it was probably all those wonderful stories constantly being told, stories so vivid and rich that I could see them clearly in my mind's eye.

My father was a photographer in the Army Air Corps. I knew that about him and had seen some of those early photographs, but his much younger brother—my now 85-year old uncle—very recently gave me almost 100 black-and-white 4x5 negatives that my father had made of my mother, before the two were married. My father died in 1974. I had never seen these images, or the negatives. And they were in pristine shape, probably from being kept in the dark all these years. But what a treasure. Aside from the

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remarkable story they tell, they are—from every angle—such strong and stunning images. So if there's a photography gene, then I hope I inherited that, too.

When I was in my 20's, I lived in New Jersey and worked in a variety of low-level administrative positions for about twelve years, at Princeton University. When I left my last position, I was given a parting gift which was a little Rollei 35mm camera. I still have the camera—really love it. But given that this was my first 'real' camera, I decided I needed a photography course. So I ended up registering for a course at Bucks County Community College, across the Delaware River, in Newtown, Pennsylvania. They had, and probably still have, a fantastic photography program with some amazing instructors who were/are also active and successful artists. I registered for two courses at the time, and one was called "Large Format Photography."

I really had no idea what that meant or would entail. In the very first class, I realized that a pre-requisite was surely needed, but I somehow bypassed that. So the instructor—and I'll just mention the name, Nancy Hellebrand—is probably the best instructor I have ever had, in the sense that she didn't pull any punches. She was, in fact, what you might call brutally honest—which, for me, was perfect. And when we gave critiques on someone else's work, she taught us a way to talk about that work—the language to talk about it coherently and smartly—which, at the time, did not seem at all unusual. Only later did I realize what a real bonus that was. And she was always so spot-on and helpful with her comments.

The school had 4x5 cameras that they lent to the students, and Nancy basically handed us the cameras, with very little instruction, and just told us to go out and take some pictures. I could not have taken a better first course than that. I learned so much by using such a totally manual camera, including all about light and how to compose upside down on the ground glass. That really taught me composition. Composing like that removed any emotional connection I might have had to my subject, whether portrait or landscape. I feel so fortunate to have had such supportive instructors early on, too, who gave me smart constructive criticism and encouragement—especially for having unwittingly stumbled into that first large format class. I went on to take other courses there, and elsewhere, and also did a longer independent study with Nancy, working on a documentary project for a couple of years.

TA: Once your career path was established, did you go through the usual channels: shoot anything, work for hire, fine art photographer?

DB: Given that my first photography instructors were mainly fine art photographers, I'm not sure I ever gave commercial photography a serious consideration. So to follow a 'fine art' path just seemed the natural direction. Also, at least in my mind, a clear dividing line existed between the commercial



*Girl on a Swing.* ©Diana Bloomfield, gum bichromate print

photographers who always printed in color, and those who were firmly entrenched in fine art, and who printed mostly in black and white. And although never explicitly stated, I do not remember ever being encouraged to cross that line. My sense was that you either chose one path or the other; that the two simply did not mix. If I had a chance to do it all over again, I would in a heartbeat boldly venture into that commercial world. That line now between commercial and fine art—if it ever truly existed—is a very indistinct and blurred one. And in my experience, whatever kind of photography I might be doing, all of it feeds and supports that same consistent vision.

I have found that when I do anything that's commercially based, I am typically asked by people who are familiar with my work and so want that same vision applied to whatever it is they're hiring me to do. And that's just a great position to find myself in, and a confirmation that maybe I'm doing something right. That's also real trust on a client's part, so I find myself working twice as hard to ensure I do right by that client. And because commercial photography isn't my forte, and that division is still there and quite clear in my mind, I always worry that I don't measure up somehow. So even though I know why I'm being hired, and I know I can just photograph the way I typically photograph—for me there's a lot of angst and worry and energy involved in the entire process, which doesn't exist for me when I do my own fine art work. That's possibly true of everyone, but if I have the sense that if I had evenly split those early efforts between commercial and fine art, that I would move between those worlds effortlessly and with much more confidence.

Very early on, I did apply for an assistant position to a very successful commercial photographer. He mostly photographed and produced product ads for well-known glossy magazines. Not knowing anything at all about that world, he did tell me that I got the job solely because he had this one test he gave everyone who applied, and I was the only one who passed. The test was to go in the darkroom and take some 4x5 film holders and load them with 4x5 film. Apparently, I was the only person who knew the correct way to open the box, take out the film, carefully re-close the box, and load the film in the dark and the right way. I stayed in that job about 72 hours, so it's safe to say he probably administered a more discerning test right after I left.

So, for me, I understood early on what I was comfortable with and good at and I just worked steadily at making images. I ultimately married the man who, several years before, had given me that earlier parting gift of the 35mm camera and we moved to North Carolina. By comparison to a very active photography scene in New Jersey and in Pennsylvania, North Carolina seemed lacking when it came to photography. That was both disappointing and discouraging, so I took some time out and returned to school, ultimately receiving a masters in English literature and creative writing. I think that served me well, and I realized that writing is a lot like photographing. I know that if I ever had to give up photography for any reason, I would turn to writing without missing a beat. I'm not sure how successful I would be, in terms of published work, but it would perfectly fill that need for creating and for telling stories.

TA: In an interview with Kat Kiernan, you indicated that the traditional darkroom held no future for you, and that once you discovered you could print without doing that "dreaded chore" of the challenges of the darkroom, you were blown away. How did that change the way you looked at photography?  
For me, photographing is not hard work and just feels very natural. The ability to look at and isolate a small piece of a larger scene—to be able to see a memorable still image in all that larger chaos—is something I can do without a lot of effort.

DB: The big downside for me was working in a traditional darkroom, which I truly detested. I was never one of those people who was just wowed by seeing an image emerge in the developer tray. I knew what that image was going to look like when I made it in camera, so to see it slowly come to life in the developer was a little anticlimactic for me, and rarely a surprise. So while I loved photographing, I really did not enjoy the whole printing aspect that accompanied it.

When I discovered the printing world that is alternative processes, my own world expanded. I was visiting a gallery in NYC when I was awestruck by this exhibit of exquisite, almost luminescent, platinum prints. The gallery manager walked over and asked me if I knew what they were. When I told her I

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*A Moment.* ©Diana Bloomfield, tri-color gum bichromate print



*Girl on a Beach.* ©Diana Bloomfield, tricolor gum bichromate print

was not familiar with the process, she explained it all to me. Out of the entire conversation, I only remembered one sentence, “And you do not have to work in a traditional darkroom for this process. You can work in low ambient light.” From that moment on, I was completely sold.

Not only does this way of printing offer me real creative freedom, but my images—what I want to say with them—doesn’t end with the camera. From start to finish, I can interpret the images the way I want. I also find many of these processes infinitely creative—specifically, the gum bichromate process, which has been my process of choice for many years now. Many of these processes are challenging, and always a revelation.

TA: I know that many photographers who utilize alternative processes don’t use digital equipment. You have mentioned that when you first started you were constantly in search of the “perfect negative.” How challenging is it to achieve that goal without using digital processes?

DB: Even though I choose to print in 19th century printing processes, I also take full advantage of 21st century digital technology. My images are contact prints; which means there is no traditional enlargement, as in a darkroom, and so the image is only as big as the negative used. So to make much larger prints, I upload my original negative or digital scan, and then make larger digital transparencies for contact printing. And, certainly, without the advantage of digital technology, I would not be able to make color separation negatives for the gum bichromate prints I make. While I love film and original negatives, 21st century technology has made life so much easier and accessible for many of these 19th



*In the River.* ©Diana Bloomfield, tricolor gum bichromate print

century printing processes.

This is such an amazing time to be a photographer and printer. That's not to say that I have given up the ideal of the "perfect negative," but digital technology has made that goal easier and perhaps closer to reality, at least in how I want to print.

TA: In Keirnan's interview you were asked about your statement that "photographs are all about the past." In an article I wrote about Sally Mann's book, *Southern Exposure*, I used an earlier quote by Mann to set up the article. She said, "Living in the South means being both nourished and wounded by the experience. To identify a person as a Southerner is always to suggest not only that her history is inescapable and profoundly formative, but that it is also imperishably present. Southerners live at the nexus between myth and reality where that peculiar amalgam of sorrow, humility, honor, loyalty, graciousness and renegade defiance plays out against a backdrop of profligate physical beauty." Sally Mann, *Deep South* (Bulfinch Press, 2005)

DB: That's a profound and eloquently written statement. She certainly captures the essence, I think, of what it means to be a Southerner, what is in our historic fabric, and all those threads that connect us. But hers is a much grander view of a past that is conceivably always present, than what I really meant with my own statement.

In general terms, a photograph is always about the past, because we will never have a real-time

experience with that moment again. It's a fugitive moment that is always moving even as I compose the image. As soon as the shutter is released, that moment is then gone forever. And everything that happens to us—every experience or conversation we have—we replay in our minds through a distorted filter. Those elusive memories we gather, and even choose to share with others, are always skewed and ever-changing. So, for me, photographs are about the past almost as soon as I look through the lens. They are essentially tangible memories.

On yet another level, our past makes us who we are. We are formed and shaped by our experiences, which impact the way we view and interpret the world, and the way we ultimately present it to others. As an interactive art form, of course, photography necessarily requires viewers to bring their own past with them when looking at and interpreting photographs.

So the past is inescapable and all around us. It influences absolutely everything we do and every photograph we make. Its only constant is that it is always dynamic.

TA: You teach a quite few workshops. How does that inform your own photography?

DB: Well, I think as artists we all spend a lot of time working alone. I tend to get my head down and just do my work. The danger to all that alone time is that you can really start to enjoy all that reclusiveness. You start to lose that connection to others and just stay too much in your own head (or, perhaps that's just me). So, on some level, workshops are a way to connect and to get away from obsessing over my own work. I also love to teach what I know well, and what I love doing myself. Passing along that knowledge and seeing others get as excited about a process as I do, is not only energizing and fun, but also rewarding—most especially when you see someone making progress and succeeding. I have also, without exaggeration, met some of the nicest people in my workshops—just so gracious and interested and interesting—and doing impressive work.

So teaching workshops is inspiring and energizing, and I often return with a fresher eye to my own work. I've made some really good friends through teaching, and they mostly all stay in touch. I also feel fortunate to be able to generate income in a way that is totally connected to photography and printing.

TA: I have read that you are widely exhibited and there are many articles about your photographic process. Since it appears as though you are what some might term "very successful" what compels you to continue to experiment with what is now termed "alternative processes?"

DB: Well, "very successful" is certainly relative. I continue to experiment with these processes, because they challenge me. I never get bored with them, and I always look forward to printing. And they offer so many ways to uniquely present my work. Even though the medium is photography, known for its repeatability, these ancient printing processes often result in one-of-a-kind images. To exactly repeat an image, in the way I print, is next to impossible, at least in my experience. I really do feel like there's so much to do and learn, and I don't know that I'll ever have enough time.

TA: There are photographers who photograph their children, Sally Mann among others. What draws you to choose your daughter over a model?

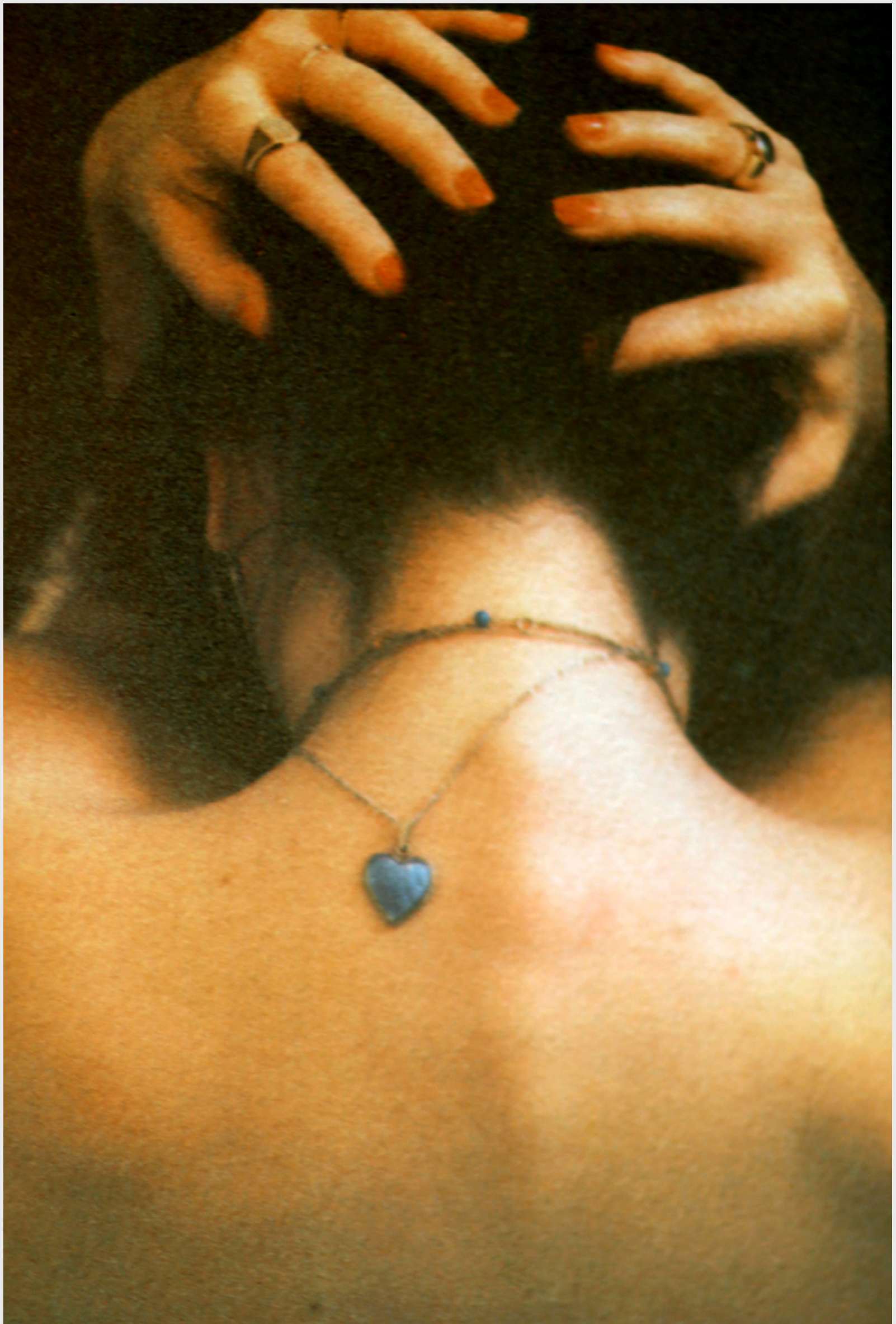
DB: In the beginning I photographed her because she was there and a willing subject, and—like any mother—I wanted photographs of my daughter. But I continue photographing her, instead of a model, because I have a strong connection to her, and I hope that's reflected in the photographs. She is also an intuitive and willing collaborator, and she seems to instinctively understand what it is I'm wanting to do. When I photograph her, we don't often have to talk, so it's just easy and also fun. She also has a dance background, so she moves beautifully and just knows how to move her body in space, in a very fluid way. She's an amazing person, daughter, and muse, really.

TA: As a curator are you excited about what has been termed as a resurgence in the alternative fields of photography: pinhole, plastic and cardboard cameras, as well as toy cameras?

Oh, yes. I can remember putting together shows like this, and to do so often required some convincing, but also to see group exhibits that showcased this type of work was not all that common. Now, not so

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*Blue Heart.* ©Diana Bloomfield, tricolor gum bichromate print



*Millenium.* ©Diana Bloomfield, a platinum/palladium print, from b&w 8x10 pinhole negative

many years later, I can't believe the difference. So many exhibits, books, and workshops are dedicated to these alternative types of printing and ways of photographing. I can see a difference in the number of people who want to learn gum, for instance.

I was also one of the founding members of Worldwide Pinhole Photography Day (WPPD). We were just a few people across the world, corresponding via email, thinking something like that would be fun and a good idea. And to see how many people submit to that event, year after year, and the workshops offered in connection to it, just amazes me. So yes—I find all of it both exciting and encouraging.

TA: Finally, what gets you up in the morning, ready to go out and shoot? What compels you to continue to push that shutter release, or in some cases expose the negative?

DB: I honestly feel that my best ideas are still ahead of me. I never tire of photographing, looking at photographs, and just seeing images in my mind's eye, or those out there in the world I haven't yet seen— that I might never get a chance to photograph.

I don't feel there are enough hours in the day to do all I want to do and learn all I would like to learn. Photographs are really just a visual diary of how I see the world and a way to tell my stories, without actually having to write about them. I'm not finished with my story-telling, so that gets me up every day.

And, without sounding too Pollyannaish, I have a great life—and a far better life than I ever envisioned, and I've certainly done more with photography than I ever thought I would. And, through the years, I've met so many great and inspiring people—photographers, teachers, mentors, curators, gallerists, and those who are just really interested in photography—and I'm still meeting them.

Finally, I also have a great husband who has brought me coffee every single morning for the past thirty years; a border collie who is always raring to go out; and a backyard studio I love—so all of that compels me to keep working.



*At Water's Edge.* ©Diana Bloomfield, multi-layered gum bichromate print, made with toy 'diana' camera



*Girl in the Mirror.* ©Diana Bloomfield, tri-color gum bichromate print



*In Thought.* ©Diana Bloomfield, tri-color gum bichromate print



*Listening Vessel.* ©Diana Bloomfield, tri-color gum bichromate print



*In the Studio; Photo by ©Tim Lytvinenko, 2014*

*Wading. ©Diana Bloomfield, tri-color gum bichromate print*