

# Imagination & Dreams

## Elizabeth Opalenik • Santa Fe Workshops



©Michael Grossman.

by *Tim Anderson*

**I**t wasn't what I expected. Several months before the workshop, "Imagination and Dreams," at Santa Fe Workshops, I emailed Reid Callanan to ask permission to cover it for a future story in *CameraArts*. Prior to that, I had already contacted the instructor, Elizabeth Opalenik, whose work has previously been featured in the magazine, for her permission as well. Both were enthusiastic about the article and agreed to let me participate.

I was drawn to this particular Workshop, first by my knowledge of the quality and spiritual aspects of Opalenik's work and also by text from the Santa Fe Workshop catalog that described the workshop:

*Good images don't just happen. Most often, our best work lies just beyond our greatest failures; in the supportive environment of this workshop, we learn to use those failures*

*to forge new ideas and new paths. Risk-taking is encouraged as we apply newly acquired skills and share our collective knowledge to take that next step in a supportive environment.*

Opalenik's only guideline to me was that if "you come through that door you're going to have to work for your story." That set the stage for a week of intense, enlightening, inspiring, and motivational photography, led by an instructor who acted more like a mentor than a teacher, as she took us, literally, under her wing.

The 12 other participants in the workshop spanned all levels of photographic experience, beginner to professional, commercial to fine art. Thirteen different cities from across the United States were represented.

We began our first day by exchanging and commenting on each other's portfolios, some of



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which were film-based (four), and those that were digital (nine). Prior to that activity, however, we were instructed to pair off and talk to each other so we could learn more about what our own self-portrait might be, an insight that Opalenik says is the basis of all good photography.

Since I had some interviewing experience, it was an exercise that I thought would be easy. Not so. It's different when it is a class assignment rather than a "job." Since we were supposed to "get personal," I found it unnerving to look my partner in the eye and ask certain types of questions. Once that was done, we then proceeded to the portfolio review.

The majority of the work was black and white. Our instructor commented when she thought necessary and pointed out areas of improvement

for all. After we each gathered up our work, and licked our lacerated wounds, we were given an assignment for the following day: For the rest of the afternoon we were told to go find ourselves. As the class was dispersing, I was trying to figure out how to go "find myself." For a good part of my younger years much time was spent in just such an activity. But I set out with an open mind and plenty of film.

Other assignments for the week centered more on personal growth rather than the mechanical or methodical precepts of photography. Our personal vision *was* confronted as were our goals and our desires. We were asked what we wanted from photography; what did we want to do for it. Each individual was asked to relate their own personal experience with the medium up to this point, this



above: © Stan Raucher.

below: ©Molly McLaughlin.



day, this minute. From teachers to college students to entrepreneurs to retirees, we went around the room, timidly at first, but a bit more open as time progressed.

At the beginning of class the next day, Opalenik sat us in a semi-circle in front of a screen. Each member of the class who shot digital submitted several images for this session, and those who shot with film showed a selection of their prints. As we went around the room some made lengthy comments and a few didn't comment at all. But that was alright with Opalenik. It was as if she was gauging us and mentally laying out the week based on our initial assignment responses.

For the afternoon session we went to a large fraternal hall in the middle of town where we met with three models. After some guidance from Opalenik, we were teamed up and given the run of all four floors. Since I was the "floater," I had the opportunity to walk around and watch as the groups of three set up their respective models in a variety of poses. Every once in a while I would see our teacher, urging someone to the left, then back a little, then hear her say, "right there, that's it!"

For almost four hours we trudged up stairs, set up equipment, assisted each other, worked with natural light, screens, reflectors, and anything else we could find that we thought might enhance our image taking.

Like the previous day, the morning after the shoot was "show and tell" time. With each set of images came dialog about how each pose was set up, lit, and executed. But even more important to Opalenik was when we were asked to describe how a particular shot made us feel.

That afternoon we went to a farm on the outskirts of Santa Fe. After we arrived with our models, our



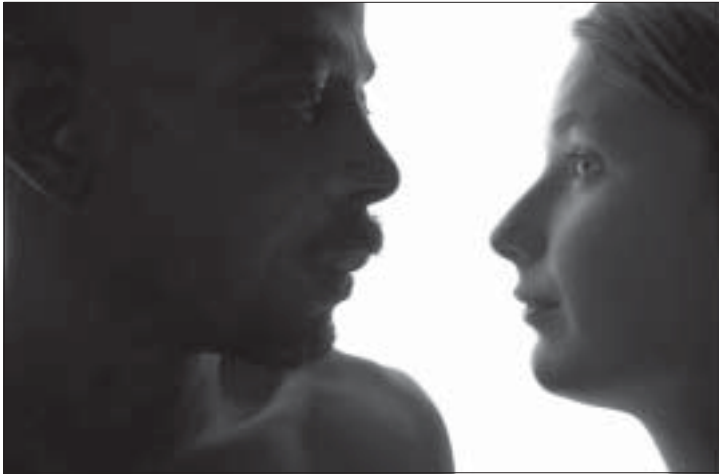
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instructor teamed us up and offered us a few bits of wisdom before turning us loose. There were barns, ponds, a screened guest house, patios, and many other little secluded corners where we could photograph our models. Again, as in our afternoon the previous day, we spent almost four hours roaming all over the farm. And, again, I heard Opalenik urging on first one group, then another. At one point, I saw her pointing into a pond as if to tell the person closest to her, “Look! Here! Don’t you see this? Come over here.”

The next morning as we went around the semi-circle, I began to notice a loosening up. People seemed to be more open with what they were feeling as they shot. It also took longer to view all the images than on the previous day. And the images were beginning to have more of a presence; they began to “pop” off the screen.

For that afternoon’s exercise, after Opalenik shared with us a few of her personal insights, she sent us off to find our space ship. We were to shoot four images that would serve to sustain us throughout the rest of our lives and identify who we were at the time we shot them. We were also instructed to write something to go with the images. The room fell silent and I could tell by the looks on some of the faces that this was an exercise they had never experienced in their lives, photographically or otherwise.

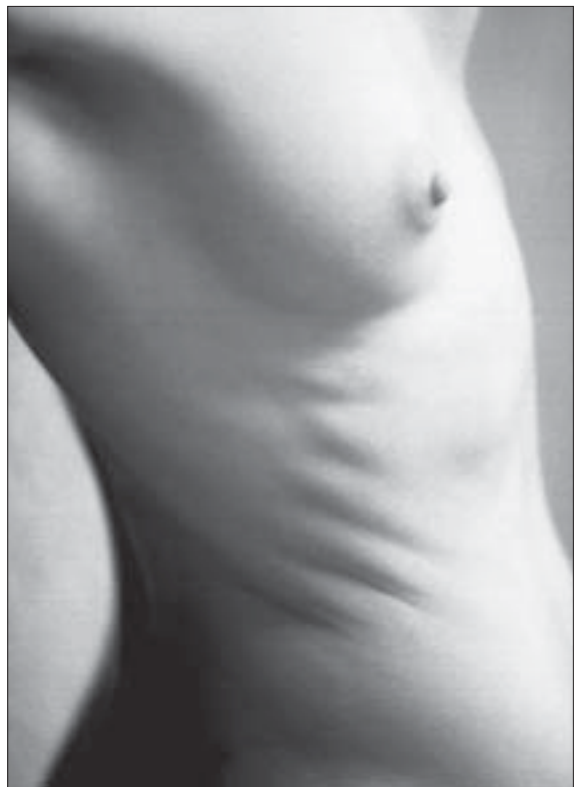
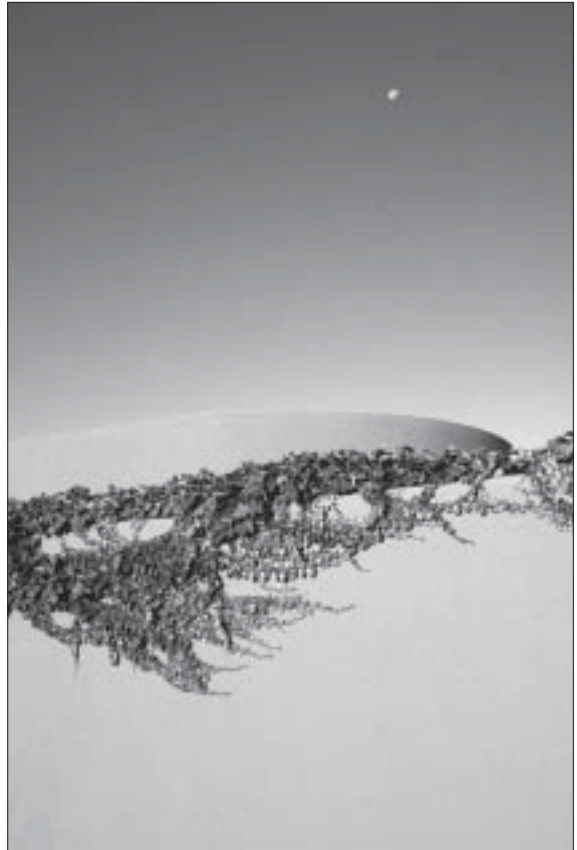
Assembling in our room the next morning, there was little chatter. It seemed as if each person was still thinking about the assignment and wondering about how to handle it. As we took our places in the now-familiar semi-circle, Opalenik walked around the room, as if hovering over her flock, waiting for someone to open up and share their own very personal *space ship* discovery. What came next

took everyone by surprise. It was as if we had been gathered, as a family, for a reunion. Histories came out. Experiences, good and bad, were shared, some in reserve. Everyone took a turn as our sorcerer stood behind each story-teller with a hand on a shoulder, or a head bowed in acknowledgement of what had just been offered. There was no assignment for the afternoon. After lunch it was time for Opalenik to share her work with us. As she pulled a variety of images out of a box and explained the process for each one it became very evident why she was teaching a class about imagination and dreams.

As a regular event each year, Santa Fe Workshops host a Friday Night Slide Show at the conclusion of each set of workshop weeks. As members of each of the seven workshops gathered at a local inn for a much-needed evening of food and relaxation, there was a buzz in the room as all participants in the workshops of that week were talking about what their particular slide show would look like. A little while after dinner the lights were dimmed and the slide show began. Our workshop, prepared by Opalenik and Course Assistant Page Bertelsen, was the second from the last group to be shown. As the music began and the images moved slowly from one to the other, I could tell that there had been a shift in the quality of our photography from what it had been at the start of the week. What was being shown to everyone in the room was something remarkable. I looked around our table and noticed fingers over mouths, heads lowered, and audible gasps. The room was silent. Our mentor, our guide, our teacher had succeeded. She took us places we never thought we could go.

As I had anticipated, because I had heard so many good things about Santa Fe Workshops, my overall experience was very rewarding. The organization, dedication, and professionalism of everyone I encountered during my week at the Workshops was excellent. I offer my personal thanks to Reid, Elizabeth, and Page. **CA**

*To view personal portfolios from each of the participants of Imagination & Dreams, please go to the free section of [www.cameraarts.com](http://www.cameraarts.com).*



top: ©Don Blasingame; bottom: ©Tim Anderson