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## Debbie Miracolo

By Louisa J. Curtis



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This month my conversation is with one of my clients, fine art photographer [Debbie Miracolo](#). One of the main reasons I wanted to write about Debbie this month is because it is an inspiring story to share as to how some good old perseverance, a lot of hard work, and a little faith, can pay off. What began as the germ of an idea, became a project, and then turned into a reality, producing a body of new work, from which some single images were selected for three separate group shows: Umbrella Arts in the East Village, PWP (Professional Women Photographers) show at Calumet Gallery and Capture Brooklyn at PowerHouse Arena in Dumbo and just recently a solo show in the very location where the idea had begun, at New York hair salon, Arrojo Studio.

Debbie originally came to see me a couple of years ago about how she could best present her work and Web site to both the fine art and editorial community. Then she came to see me again and we spoke about her new project, and how best to proceed, so it is also very exciting for me to see how her idea turned into a reality with her latest series entitled "The Change Agents."

I asked Debbie to tell the readers about this particular portrait project and how it all came about, and she responded, *"I am an environmental portrait photographer and always looking for new subjects to photograph. I get my hair cut at the trendy Arrojo Studio and after observing the eclectic and colorful group of people who work there, I thought it would be interesting to photograph them, but in their home environments. The idea started brewing about 3 years ago when I first became a client at Arrojo studio. It wasn't until much later- around summer 2009 that it started to take shape. My stylist, Stacey, and I have great conversations about the arts and the creative process while she does my hair. Over time, (several appointments), the idea for the project began to evolve."* Stacey also recalls, *"It's not unusual for clients to comment on the visual spectacle in the salon. But what was different about Debbie's interest was how textured her interest seemed to be. It wasn't just about the clothes or the hair, but how those aspects of style provided a window into our urban lives: What the city is to us, how we grow up here, how our vision complements our clients' aspirations."*

I also love the title for her project so I asked her how she chose it, and she said, *"I love it too! The first time I heard the phrase it was used by Stacey, while she was doing my hair. She was extremely helpful in getting the project off the ground as well as brainstorming with me about it. At one point I was still unsure of what direction the project would take, and she casually said something like, 'Well, we're (the stylists) all change agents' The second I heard it I think I literally gasped, and asked 'What did you say'? I went home and looked it up – it's actually a business term, anyway, I was beyond excited. Not only did I have a perfect title but also now I knew what the series was about. Titles are very important to me – they have to be simple and perfect and this one was absolutely. It's an ideal description of the stylists' role and also ties in beautifully with my recurrent theme of transition, which is underlying in all of my work. It refers to the stylists creating physical change in others, but also the fact that clients often reveal details of their (our) personal lives to our stylists. (Is it conversing via reflections in the mirror that encourage us to be so open?) As a result, the reason 'behind' the change in hair is often revealed!"*

I asked Debbie to share what the most challenging aspects of the project were, and she said that scheduling the individual shoots and communicating with her subjects. To begin with, a sign-up sheet was posted in the staff break room requesting volunteers to be photographed in their homes. Initially, 20 people signed up, and of that 20, 13 people ended up actually participating. Once the shoots started, she was able to create a buzz and each time Debbie went in to get her hair done, she'd recruit one or two more. She continues, *"But still, there was a lot of waiting for responses and confirmations, and the whole scheduling process was kind of long and bumpy. There were lots of postponements as well, for all kinds of reasons, like 'there was a drunken brawl in my apartment last night and it's in no condition for a photo shoot.' I also recall a poison ivy rash on the face, a sick pup that needed a vet visit, and a fight with a boyfriend resulting in a sleepless night. I never got too frustrated though – I saw that this was the nature of the beast and it would serve me well to just go with the flow. I've always been aware that certain things are beyond my control and that's life. I just kept sending friendly messages if necessary, although there were a few instances where I felt I had done enough, so I just said 'I'd love to photograph you – let me know when you want to schedule it.' And I would leave the ball in their court. I'm still kind of disappointed about the ones that got away but hey, you never know, they may show up in Part 2!"*

And of course, I asked her about the rewarding aspects of her project and her answer echoed my sentiment at the beginning of this article. During this entire process, Debbie reached out to pros in the community, myself included, as well as her friends and colleagues whenever she was uncertain. She also got the salon owner Nick Arrojo on board and kept him in the loop, and he in turn was extremely helpful by helping to finance and promote both the project and the show. She said, *"From the spark of an idea to a solo show in just over a year. I learned quite a bit along the way and feel inspired to see many more ideas come to fruition."*

I was curious as to how long she spent with each of her subjects and how she decided to shoot each one, given that each environment was different? She said she would spend about 2-3 hours with each subject, beginning with them showing her around their home. She says, *"Some people make sure everything is neat and clean (although I tell them it's not important); others live in various levels of clutter and don't seem self conscious about it. I love it all – each new environment is different and interesting in some way and I look forward to finding that one thing that will make the portrait stand out. With a dual background in fine art and graphic design, I naturally create mental compositions from what I see in front of me. Invariably I'm drawn to at least one or two locations in the space and then I just start from there, fairly quickly. For me, planning doesn't really work. I get the best results, and prefer to work, by diving in and letting one thing lead to another. And it always works. It's part of the fun – the not knowing, the lack of control. I guide things along and photograph what happens. Over time I've learned to trust myself with this process. In the salon I see the staff as an ensemble cast in a grand performance. I guess I'm really deconstructing the whole into its parts in order to see and appreciate each one more clearly."*

And in closing, I asked her what advice she might have for other photographers, who might be thinking about finding a project for themselves, and this is what she said, *"In my case, I have always let the project find me. I keep my mind open to possibilities where ever I go, whatever I do and I think, Where could this lead? My projects all have this in common: they are about something I was familiar with or observed over a period of time before I ever began photographing them, and they have an element that strongly drew me to them. I might feel a certain connection, or a particular emotion that evokes something in my memory and stirs my imagination in some way. Being an artist isn't just about making images – it takes a core understanding of oneself, who you are as an artist and a human being, and what you want to say with your work. Why do you feel the way you do? I've learned a lot about this over the years from some amazing teachers, a lot of introspection, and a lot of writing. Nevertheless, my personal vision is always evolving. Just a few months ago I took a class, 'The Art of the Artist's Statement' with gallery owner Michael Foley at his Exhibition Lab here in New York City. Although I have written several statements in the past, I jumped at the chance to work with Michael and get his valuable feedback in regards to writing about 'The Change Agents.' "*

Besides looking out for specific teachers and experts in the field, Debbie also highly recommends seeking the support of other photographers. She says, *"I couldn't function as an artist without my own little group. We started out as virtual strangers with very little in common, except for a desire to push forward with our work in photography. I know I speak for them as well when I say that banding together for support was one of the best decisions we've ever made. Now, about six years later we all agree that we've accomplished much more because of each other than we ever could have done working in a vacuum."*

And here are my **ChatterDozen** quick fire questions with Debbie's responses:

- 1) Who is your favorite photographer? *"Sally Mann (especially At Twelve), Elinor Carucci, Andrea Modica, Emmet Gowan, David Hilliard, there are so many and the list keeps growing."*
- 2) Where do you get your inspiration and ideas? *"Memories, children's literature, poetry, the city, nature..."*
- 3) Give me three words that best describe your creative style? *"Intimate, evocative, revelatory"*
- 4) When and how did you start taking photographs? *"My mother was an artist and avid amateur photographer. We had a darkroom in our basement and so it was part of my life at a very young age. As a fine arts major in college, I took several photo classes and often incorporated photography into my work. I married my college boyfriend, a photo student, and needless to say we've made a lot of photographs with many cameras over the years!"*
- 5) Do you have any pre-shoot rituals? *"I summon the "extravert" in me to come forward. I don't mean that in a spooky, witch-crafty way – but just as a conscious shift in my psyche. Perhaps it's what actors do before they go onstage. Photographing another human being requires me to be outgoing and engaging. Although I rely on my senses and art background for most aesthetic decisions, it's my behavior and verbal communication that can ultimately, on a good day, draw out just the right expression or gesture from my subject."*
- 6) Do you have an essential piece of photographic gear that you always carry with you - your "must-have" item? *"I would have to say it's my favorite lens, which I used almost exclusively for this project, the Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L. It shows me the world in a most poetic way."*
- 7) And what is the most important piece of non-photographic gear you always have with you? *"Let's see, comfortable clothes perhaps. I do a lot of climbing on top of things, through windows (onto fire escapes) and lying on the floor. I like interesting angles!"*
- 8) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be and why? *"I don't like the idea of living in a previous time because that would mean I wouldn't be here now! However if I could time travel at will I might visit ancient Egypt and Greece, oh and Paris to hang out with the Impressionist artists in the late 1800's and find out what real Absinthe was all about, and definitely to the South Pacific to watch Gauguin at work and understand how he was able to interpret so magically what he saw."*
- 9) What is your favorite food? *"Chocolate"*
- 10) What is your favorite animal? *"Horse"*
- 11) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? *"Anyone who has a generous heart, an open mind, an optimistic outlook, a firm grasp on who they are and what they want out of life, and the patience and perseverance to achieve their goals."*
- 12) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? *"Thank you to my parents for nurturing the artist in me. Thank you to my husband for always letting me be me and for being such an amazing cook every evening, and not giving me a hard time when I spend most of my waking hours on work. Thank you photo editors, curators, and every one else who has recognized something of interest in my work, and given me an opportunity to take it a step further. Thank you to each of my friends and family members whom I've leaned on when I felt unstable!"*