

July 5, 2012

Justine Reyes

By Louisa J. Curtis

This month my conversation is with fine art photographer [Justine Reyes](#). Usually I know or have already met the photographer I am writing about but ironically, Justine and I have never met, although we have made several attempts. Somehow it “just” hasn’t happened, yet. A friend of mine originally introduced me to her work and I was particularly taken by her personal series, “Home, Away From Home.” So much so that I featured her as one of the photographers of the month in my seniors-themed newsletter back in January of 2011. But I always knew that I wanted to find out more about Justine and her work, so here we go.



*Sand Pebble Motor Lodge, at the Jersey Shore, Pt. Pleasant Beach, NJ
from the series "Home Away from Home" © Justine Reyes*

I began by asking Justine to tell us a little bit about how and why she began this particular project “Home, Away From Home” and when it all began for her? I started photographing my family (my mother and two uncles) while in grad school in 2003 but this project didn’t begin until 2006, shortly after the death of my uncle Vinnie. I took my Mom and Uncle Al on a cruise to Bermuda to help deal with the loss and celebrate life. Since then we have traveled to Spain, Italy, Australia and the Jersey Shore together. Home, Away from Home combines the photographs I take of my mom

and uncle Al at home, with pictures of them in hotel rooms around the world. The pictures of them at home grapple with the realization of my parent's mortality and the inevitability of their death. Away from home the hotel rooms become grand stages for dramas that never quite unfold. I focus on the subtle underlying tension created by being slightly out of place and out of one's comfort zone and the little things we do to recreate a small piece of home wherever we go. By staging them in foreign hotel rooms designed to have the look and feel of domestic comfort, I begin to draw relationships between home and away from home both literally and metaphorically.



Sydney, Australia from the series "Home Away from Home" © Justine Reyes

Having lost both of my own parents in the last few years, I felt particularly drawn to Justine's images and the way that she and her family dealt with their loss and subsequent grief. The passing of our parents and the older generation comes to us all at some point, and yet each one of us, each family, each culture, copes with it differently. I was curious as to what the most challenging aspects of this project were for her, especially as it was so personal. The most challenging aspect of this project was writing about it. The hardest part was admitting to myself that a major component of this work is the fear of my aging parents death. It was difficult to share in the beginning but the response to the work has been a great experience and very rewarding for me. When I lecture and talk about my work it has also been quite surprising to see how other people connect to it because it is so personal. Someone might start crying because they are identifying with a death in their own family. That's the goal – making meaningful work, even though it's hard when you work on your own. When it's personal it's interesting, and it's powerful to know you can connect with people that way.

I also asked Justine what the most rewarding thing about the project was for her and she replied: The most rewarding thing has been spending time with my family while also making work that is important to me. I wanted to know if there were any future plans for this particular project? I want to photograph them for as long as I can. I envision putting this work into a book at some point, but not yet.

I encourage you to go to Justine's [Web site](#) so you can see all of her work. There is an intense focus in each of her studies that I really like, so I asked her how she manages to stay so focused on the objective and keep the exploration of her topic on point, especially when it is so personally driven? I am very hard on myself. Sometimes I do things over and over until I figure it out. I also experiment and try different things. I am a tough critic and I also show work in progress to people whose opinions I trust. When or how do you know a series is complete – or is there always room to do more? I think that is intuitive as well. Sometimes the work itself dictates that. I like to work on multiple projects for extended periods of time. This allows me to step back from the work to take some time looking at it, edit and then shoot some more.



Bermuda Legend, Carnival Cruise from the series "Home Away from Home" © Justine Reyes

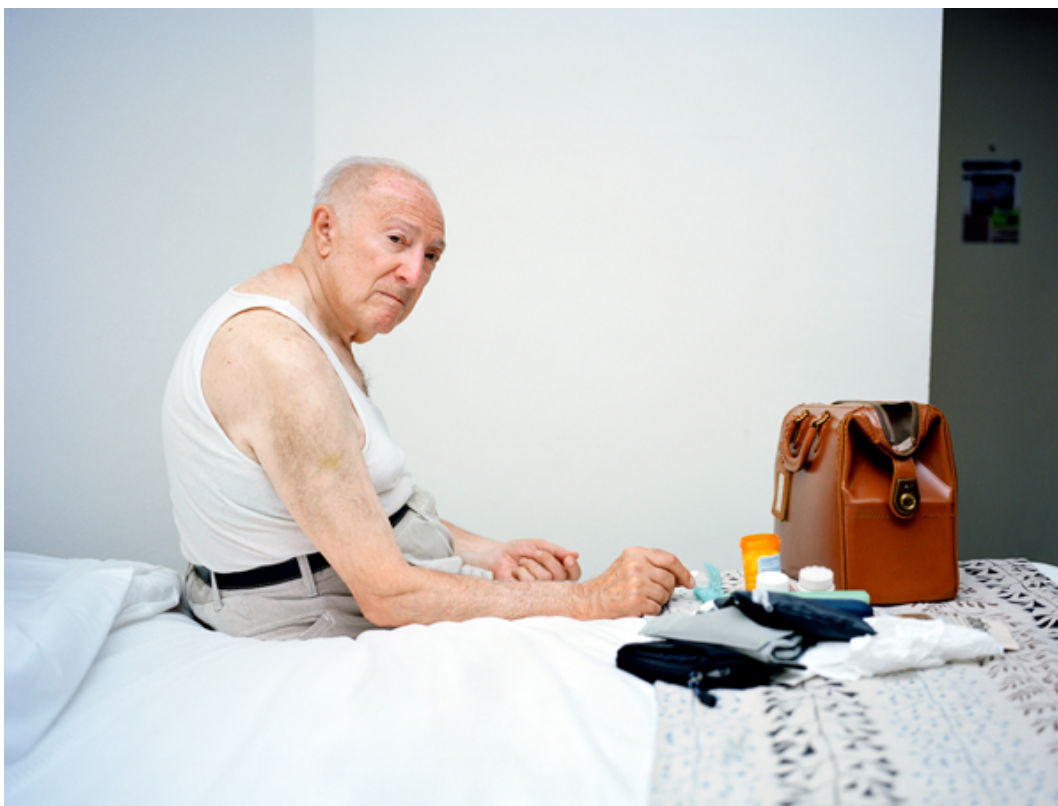
I like to ask the photographers I interview if they have an "essential" piece of gear they always carry with them, and also their must-have non-photographic item, and Justine responded: I'm not a real photographer in the sense of always having a camera or always shooting for that matter. I usually keep my 4x5 in the studio and use a Mamiya 7 for most else. The last few summers I have been shooting on the beach with a Holga and have been using it more often. For me it is good practice and allows me to have fun. Non-photographic gear that I always have handy are a pen and notebook and my lip-gloss, all equally essential.

When and how did you start taking photographs and what would you do if you weren't a photographer? I started drawing and painting as a child. You can certainly see her love of fine art and painting in Justine's photography. I went to the High School of Music, Art and the Performing Arts and fell in love with photography. If I wasn't an artist I think I would be a psychologist. And who is your favorite photographer? There are too many to name but a few favorites are Ori Gersht, Elizabeth Heyert, Joel Sternfeld, Pieter Hugo and Pinar Yolacan.

I asked Justine how her photographic projects come about and where she gets her ideas and inspiration? Does she keep a journal, for example? *I have kept a journal over the years but recently I haven't been recording thoughts daily. I do always have a notebook with me to jot down abstract ideas when they arise. I use my photographs to work through or process my experiences and feelings. I work very intuitively and my work is often emotionally charged.*

Each of your series certainly contains a very personal element, whether it is "Home, Away From Home," "Vanitas," the still life series, or the more provocative "Masks" - I see some recurring themes, such as travel, luggage, and the use of mesh fabric - and yet they are all so different – is that range deliberate or a happy accident? *I don't think its deliberate, I work very intuitively – I certainly do travel a lot and at one point I was out of the country more than I was home. That's why I took my family with me, so I could share something special with them that is such a big part of my life. A goal of mine is to travel to every country in the world.*

When is your birthday? *My birthday is March 21st 1978.* So Justine is an Aries, born right on the 1st day of the 1st sign of the zodiac, and like a true Aries, she exhibits some adventurous traits and especially loves to travel and explore new countries. And yet, she is also right on the cusp because she also possesses the "watery" imagination and sensitivity of the Pisces.



Cairns, Australia from the series Home Away from Home

And last but not least we have the ChatterDozen quick questions:

- 1) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? *I look forward to Wednesday because I pick up my food from the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and then go running with Bridge Runners - two things that keep me healthy and happy.*
- 2) What is your favorite TV show? *Breaking Bad, Girls and Game of Thrones*

- 3) What was the last movie you saw? A friend had a spare ticket to see Katy Perry's "Part of Me" – I actually enjoyed it more than I expected!
- 4) Give me a favorite word, and why? I don't really have a favorite word but I do say "Oh brother" and "Oh boy" a lot!
- 5) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be and why? I would love to have grown up in the 60's and 70's. There is a little hippie that lives inside of me. (I love that!)
- 6) What is your favorite music, song, or band? I'm obsessed with 80's music, especially "early" Madonna, or soundtracks from movies like Pretty in Pink or Say Anything
- 7) How about your favorite animal? My cat Pickles
- 8) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, and go anywhere you wanted to and perhaps somewhere you've never been before, where would you fly to and why? I love to travel and think my next trip will be to Costa Rica for Surf Camp. One place I have always wanted to go is to Mali. I would like to go by myself for a month or so. I have been to southern, eastern and northern Africa but never western. I am interested in the people, the music and the culture. I am thinking about finally going some time next year.
- 9) What is your favorite food? Ethiopian (No big surprise given Justine's previous answer)
- 10) And your favorite color? Green
- 11) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? My family, my teachers and my friends
- 12) And besides these key people for your acceptance speech, who else (dead or alive) do you admire? My Mother
This was such a perfect and fitting answer considering that this month is July and the sign of Cancer represents the archetypical mother, our childhood and family upbringing, so I asked Justine to tell me more about why she picked her mother and she said: My mom is a really strong person without seeming tough. She is so nice and kind, loving and generous. She has done a lot in her life, she knows who she is and she enjoys herself without worrying about what anyone else thinks, and I admire her for that. (Me too!)



Sand Pebble Motor Lodge, Pt Pleasant, NJ from the series Home Away from Home, ©Justine Reyes